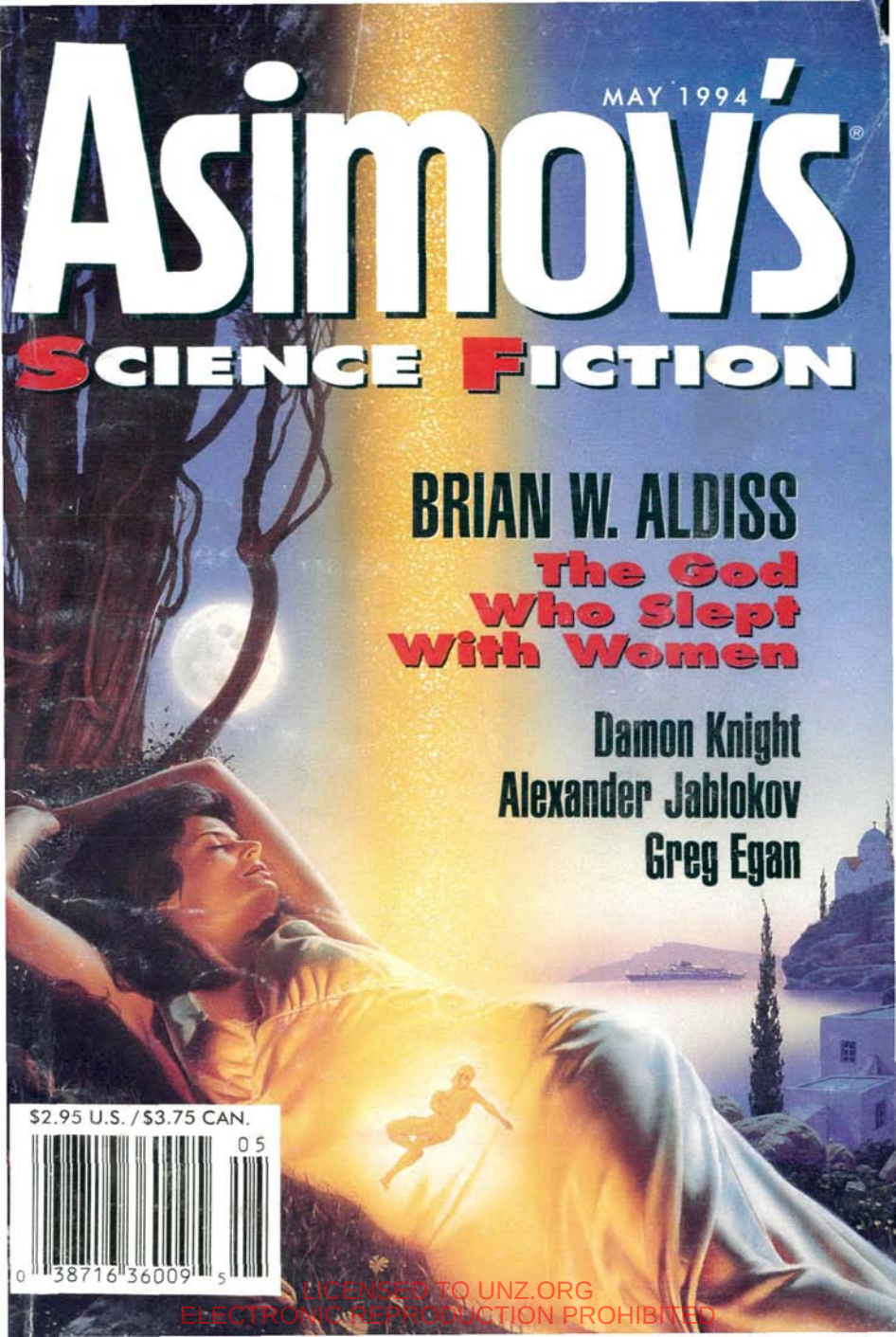

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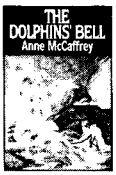

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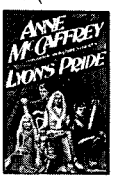

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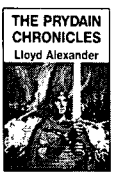

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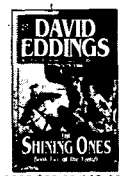

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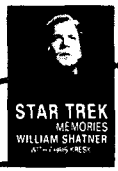

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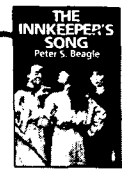

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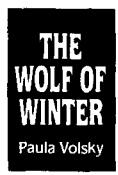

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-two Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have recieved nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1993 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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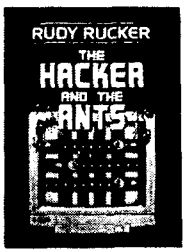

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EDITORIAL

CHANGES

by Gardner Dozois

Change has come once again to *Asimov's*, but, unlike the last few changes, when we had the sad duty of reporting to you the tragic deaths of Isaac Asimov and Baird Searles, these are positive changes, changes that we're actually glad to announce. What a relief!

First, I'm proud and happy to announce that, starting with our July issue, Robert Silverberg's popular column "Reflections" will be moving to the pages of *Asimov's*, where it will be a regular monthly feature.

Robert Silverberg is one of the most famous SF writers of modern times, with dozens of novels, anthologies, and collections to his credit, as well as five Nebula Awards and four Hugo Awards. (In case you've been living under a rock for the last few decades, a partial mention of Silverberg's best-known works would include famous titles such as *Dying Inside, Born with the Dead, Lord Valentine's Castle, The World Inside,* and *Kingdoms of the Wall.*) "Reflections," his monthly column of opinion and commentary on science fiction, the science fiction professional and fannish scenes, the cutting edge of scientific speculation, and the shape of modern society (among dozens of other topics) has been running in *Amazing* to an enthusiastic response for several years, and we're happy to be able to offer it to our readers now as a regular feature. Bob has had a long association with *Asimov's* under several succesive editors, since making his first sale here to George Scithers in the '70s (several Silverberg stories from the pages of *Asimov's* such as "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Enter a Soldier. Later, Enter Another," have gone on to win major awards), and it'll be great to now be able to feature him in the magazine each and every month. I once said that nobody could replace an Isaac Asimov, and, of course, Bob has no intention of even trying to do that—but if there's any writer alive who can rival Isaac for sharpness of intellect and the breadth, depth, and variety of his interests, it's Silverberg, and we think his column will be an invaluable addition to the magazine.

We will also continue to feature Guest Editorials from time to time (we are always on the lookout for them), and, of course, your response, the response of the readership at large, to both Silverberg's "Reflections" column and the

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Guest Editorials is not only welcome, but actively solicited. We welcome such feedback, and the most interesting letters of this sort will definitely be featured in our letters column on a regular basis.

Our next announcement is that, after an exhaustive search (and boy, was it! Have you ever tried to read your way through a slush pile consisting of hundreds of sample reviews and critical articles? My advice is, don't!) we have come up with a replacement for the late Baird Searles, our regular book reviewer for many years. It would no doubt have amused Baird to learn that it takes three people to replace him—for we have decided to rotate the "On Books" column through a sequence of three different reviewers, and so Moshe Feder, Peter Heck, and Paul Di Filippo will be sharing the reviewing slot on a rotating basis. In addition, Norman Spinrad's column will continue as usual, so, in effect, we will be featuring four different critical voices in *Asimov's* which should, we hope, give us balanced coverage of a very wide range of different kinds of books, across a wide spectrum of tastes and sensibilites. The first of the new reviewers starts in this very issue; turn to Sheila Williams's introduction to "On Books" on page 166 for more details of this plan, and for biographical sketches of our three new reviewers.

So, to all of the new additions to the magazine; Welcome Aboard! And when I have to come to you again with changes, may they always be as pleasant as these! ●

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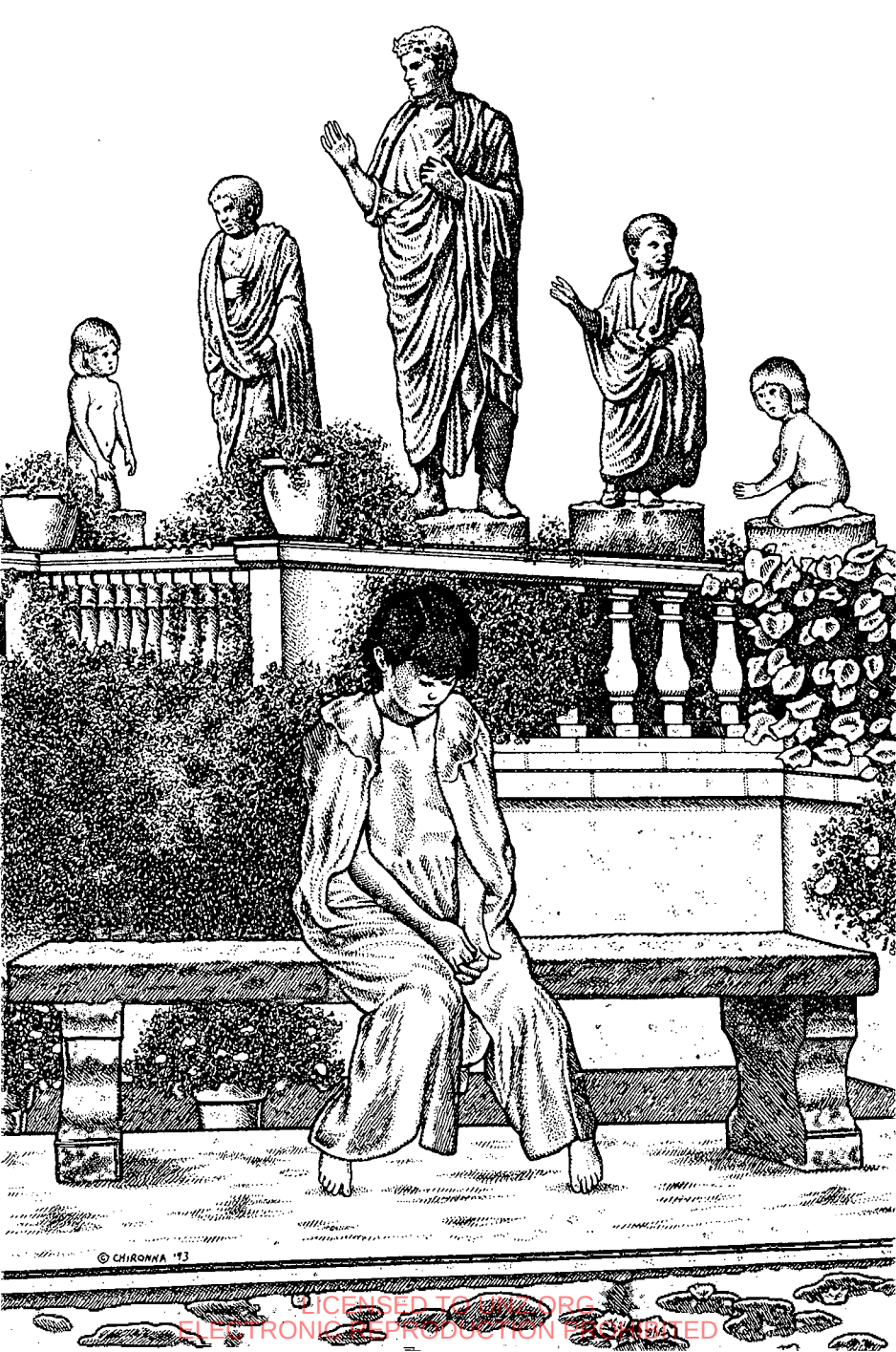

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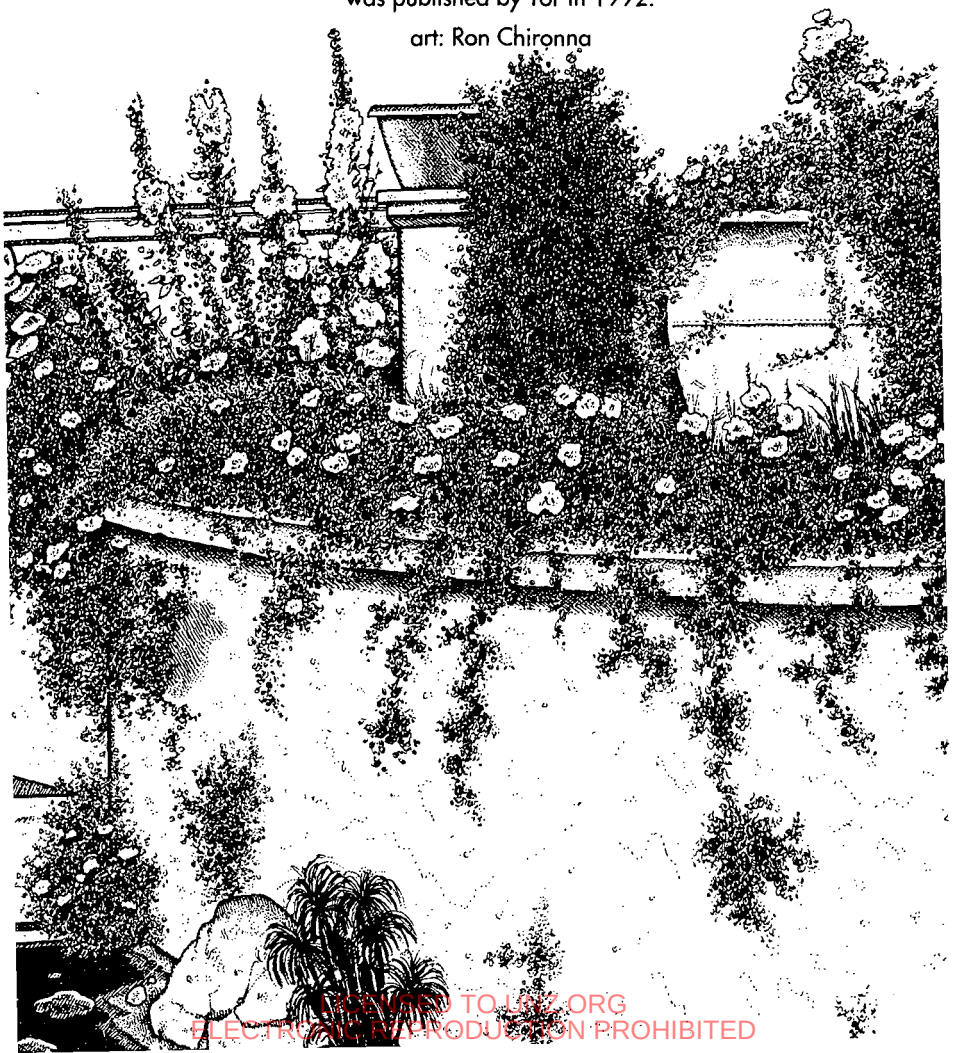
FORTYDAY

Damon Knight

Damon Knight tells us the following tale was inspired by something he saw in the window of a Hindu shop in Dublin, and by a visit to an excavated Roman villa at Fishbourne in Sussex, England. While there, he held in his hand "an oil lamp that Drusilla might have used. It was no bigger than a sparrow, and I didn't want to give it back." Mr. Knight's most recent novel, *Why Do Birds,* was published by Tor in 1992.

art: Ron Chironna



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Drusilla awoke in the little bed at the foot of the big bed, the matrimonial bed that she had occupied with three husbands, two of them at the same time. The lamp was smoking; she felt thick-headed, as she usually did in the mornings now. What had she forgotten? Oh, yes—this was to be her son's fortyday.

Her bladder was full. She put her feet down on the cold tiles, crossed to the commode and sat there; it was almost too high for her, but there was another, a little one, beside it. That was her future.

When she stood up and turned around, the stranger was standing just outside the lamplight. "Does it distress you that your son Rufus is older than you are?" he said.

"He is not older."

"Taller, then."

"He was always taller."

He looked at her. "Does it distress you that you now look like a child of ten?"

"Yes, but it's natural."

"If it's natural, why should it distress you?"

"Why do you keep asking these questions?"

But he was gone, and Numilia was coming in. The slave's hands were empty; where were the little gift baskets? "Are there no visitors today?" Drusilla asked. She was still not quite awake.

"Rufus is seeing the clients, by his order. He told me to tell you last night, but you were sleeping so nicely."

Drusilla said nothing for a moment. "I can have you thrashed."

"Oh, mistress, forgive me." Smiling, the slave made an exaggerated gesture of terror.

"Get out."

Numilia retreated, with a gleam of satisfied malice in her eye. Drusilla's reign as mistress of the house was over, the slave had just reminded her; well, she knew that, but Rufus could have waited one more day.

She took off the gown she had slept in and put on a clean one, and a cloak because the morning was cool. Perhaps she would dress herself from now on; she had noticed lately that she was embarrassed to let even a slave look at her boy's breasts and her downy pubis like the head of a chick.

She opened the door and went out into the colonnade. The farther half of the enclosed garden lay in deep shadow; in the nearer half, the trees and statues were glimmering with dew.

It was about the second hour; a thread of smoke rose from the kitchen. A few slaves were moving about on errands; the rest stood or squatted in the colonnade, waiting for orders.

Three share-crop farmers, led by a slave, emerged from the atrium and

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started around the colonnade toward Rufus's room. Drusilla returned their greetings, but when two more appeared, she crossed the garden hurriedly to the passage beyond the kitchen, opened the outer door and went into the courtyard. She walked past the kitchen garden and the compost heap covered with the stalks of the summer's harvest, then past the dormitory, the kennels and stables, to the swine pen where a dozen shoats ran up to greet her.

Then across the dark creaking bridge, hearing the unseen water talking to itself underneath, and up again, a long uphill stride into the listening silence of the pines. From here she could look out over the meadows and the dawn-rimmed Etruscan hills, a view that always gave her pleasure.

The elder of her first two husbands had planted most of these trees; wood was the estate's chief source of income now, grapes and olives next, then the pottery and the sheep and swine, and their little plot of wheat last.

A bird called, clear and cold, somewhere up in the branches; then another.

Without turning her head she knew that the stranger was standing beside her. "Tell me," he said, "what happens to birds? Do they go back into the egg?"

"Don't you know? When they are too small to fly, other animals eat them. Except the swallow that buries itself in the mud until it is reborn in the spring."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Everybody knows it."

He was gone, and she felt lightheaded, perhaps because she had been angry before, or because she wanted her breakfast. A fragment of verse was drifting through her mind:

> The swallow tunnels in the mire;
> Shall I prefer the water, or the fire?
> Speak, Muses . . .

She turned to go down the hill, and after a few steps found that she had broken into a run without meaning to. It was indecorous at her age, but perhaps no one would see her, and after all, what if they did? The exercise warmed her and made her limbs supple; she was smiling when she reached the bottom.

In part of the kitchen garden, where beanstalks among the scattered straws had begun their retreat into the earth, slaves were putting up trestle tables. She watched them a moment, then entered the house and went to the larder.

As she emerged carrying her herbs and spices, Thessalus the cook

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came out into the colonnade in his soiled gown and burst into a complaint. "Lady, no 'elp good in kitchen. 'Ow I do?—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, talk in Greek. You sound like an owl."

He said with dignity, "You asked me before not to speak Greek to you, in order to practice my Latin which offends you, but as you wish, it doesn't matter, I only want to say that these swineherds are of no use in the kitchen and only hinder me. I have asked you to buy another kitchen helper, but I really need two. It is bad enough on ordinary days, but now, when we are at heads and tails getting ready for the banquet . . . "

"Is the bread doughy again?"

He glared at her. "The bread? He is trying hard to make it better. It is good bread. It is not yet excellent, but he is doing his best, mistress. Please don't begin that again. I will see to it that he does his best."

"See that *you* do yours, too."

The cook turned with a muttered exclamation and hurled himself into the kitchen, where she heard him shouting at the other slaves. She moved off down the colonnade toward the front of the house.

She had sent a message nine days ago to a neighbor, asking for the loan of his cook, and he had agreed, but there was some difficulty—the slave was ill, and might not be able to come. But she could hardly tell Thessalus all that without seeming to apologize.

On the way to the atrium she looked in for a moment on her last husband, Quinctius, who lay red and wrinkled on the folded cloth in his basket. A pregnant young slave, kneeling beside him with a fly-whisk, watched her without speaking. She reminded herself to speak to Rufus later: was the child his, and would he raise or expose it when it was born?

In the corner gleamed the seated life-size carving of Priapus, where Quinctius would go when he was small enough to rest in the hollow at the tip of the god's erect wooden pizzle.

It was understood that Calpurnia would do the honors, making it possible for Quinctius to be reborn as her next child. It was not considered likely that she would have another child, but the alternative would be a slave or a prostitute. At any rate, Calpurnia might enjoy the god's phallus well smeared with goose-grease; she complained often enough that she never saw Rufus's.

The arms and legs of the little red person moved feebly; his eyes were closed, those fierce eyes; his mouth opened and shut, but there was no sound. That was better; for almost six months he had roared incessantly, and nothing could be done to soothe him.

She had been fifty-one when they married, and he fifty-six, a man in his full strength. For ten years he had astonished her with his vigor in bed. It was the best time for both of them, because they were both past

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forty and growing younger. When the ten years were over, she had been to all appearance a young matron not yet twenty, he a youth of fourteen.

After that they had another few years of tender dalliance, gradually more condescending on her part. Then the last years came, and they were difficult for him, especially so because of all the trouble he had with his teeth. She had borne his rages as best she could; after a time he seemed to forget who he was, and ran and shouted with the children. Now she visited him several times a day; she felt that she could talk to him in his stillness as she never had been able to do when he was moving about.

Of her first two husbands, one had been older than she and one younger. Portius, the younger one, had suffered an affliction in his right arm just before he turned forty; afterward, instead of healing he died and was cremated; it was a great disgrace to the family and his name was not spoken.

Behind her the stranger said, "Do you wish things were otherwise? Would it be better to die as Portius did, without warning?"

"No, of course not. Death is for animals." The slave glanced up incuriously, then returned her attention to the fly-whisk.

"There are accidents," he said, "and soldiers sometimes die in battle."

"That's different. Soldiers try not to kill each other, but they know the risk they take."

"But you, you take no risk. You know what's going to happen and when."

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Oh, no. In my country, no one grows young after forty. We all grow older instead, until we are so sick that we die. But no man knows the day and hour."

"How absurd! Wasteful, too. Why do you stand for it?"

There was no reply; he was gone again.

In the atrium, smoke was going everywhere except through the hole in the roof. She arranged her offerings before the little household goddess in her niche, and lighted the incense with a twig from the fire. When she left, slaves were coming in with ladders and pails to clean the blackened frescoes on the ceiling, although the smoke was so dense that they could barely see.

It was now the third hour, and slaves and children were gathering around the sunlit garden to watch the priest's two assistants putting stakes in the ground to build the Janus hut.

It was always the same, a round hut of wattle roofed with straw, with a hide curtain for a door. There was nothing especially mysterious about it, in Drusilla's view, but only those dedicated to Janus could build it or take it down.

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The last of the clients were coming out of Rufus's room now. She went into the family dining room, where slaves were laying the table for breakfast; she sat down and took some bread and olives. Presently Rufus's wife Calpurnia entered with her two children and their nanny, and finally Rufus himself, who sat down and helped himself to cheese with a great stir. "You might have waited," he said to Drusilla when he saw her eating.

"So might you," she said.

Rufus took a bite and chewed, staring at her, then rose from his chair and walked around the table. "Get up," he said to his daughter Prima, who was sitting beside Drusilla. Rufus sat down in the vacated chair (Prima meanwhile giving him a reproachful glance), and said, "Mother, we've got to live together in this house, and it's better to have an understanding."

"Yes," she said.

"There can't be two masters."

"No."

"But I'll ask your advice whenever I need it, and you can be of great help to me, as long as you understand. Is it agreed?"

"Yes, Rufus."

"Good, then." He leaned nearer and said, "Give me just a word before the ceremony. After all, you're my mother. How much does it really hurt?"

She kept her mouth closed and did not look at him.

"Oh, well, if *you* lived through it, I suppose I can too." He went back to his seat, displacing Prima again, and spoke sharply to little Secundus, who had a sulky expression and was pounding the cheese with his fist.

"I don't care," Secundus shouted, and kicked the table. Rufus gestured to the nanny, who rose and took Secundus away screaming. Then the butler appeared with his accounts. Drusilla got up, and Calpurnia did too.

"He kept me awake all night," Calpurnia said as they left. She was pale and looked more haggard than usual.

"Rufus was always a fearful child. It will be all right when it's over."

In the courtyard a little slave girl was weaving flowers into straw hats for the banquet. Clattering sounds came from the kitchen. "I'll be glad, too, when it's over," said Calpurnia.

At noon when Rufus and Calpurnia retired for their nap, Drusilla stayed awake and made sure the door slaves were at their posts. Toward the eighth hour guests began to arrive: landowners from neighboring estates, and the same farmers who had come in the morning, now with their wives and children in tow.

Marcus Pollio bustled toward her with elaborate apologies. "Dear

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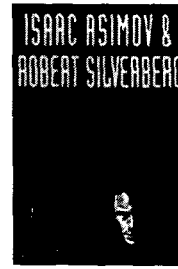

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Drusilla, about my cook—well, to tell you the truth it wasn't he who was indisposed, it was my wife, who felt she could not do without the special meals he prepared for her. She sends her regrets. She is feeling better now, but preferred not to travel. I hope you were not inconvenienced."

"No, it was nothing. Please give it no more thought, Marcus."

"You're very kind." Bowing and smiling, he went away to talk to Rufus. Then the carriages from more distant places began to roll up, and for a while the vestibule was full of guests complaining about the bad roads, while foot slaves helped them off with traveling shoes and into sandals. Gifts were piling up on a table in the atrium.

Drusilla's sister Serena from Rome appeared, and they embraced; they had been companions in first childhood, and still felt a great affection for each other although they seldom met. There was no time to talk, because Calpurnia's mother and father, both in their vigorous second youth, were bustling through the entrance.

The courtyard was full of drivers and outriders unharnessing their horses, slave children running about underfoot, dogs barking and women shouting. One of the carriages had broken an axle and was blocking the way of others. Rufus had gone to his room with Calpurnia and her parents. Drusilla, summoned by the butler, got four husky slaves to support the leaning carriage at one corner while other slaves dragged it out of the way. Somehow in the confusion one of the dogs was run over, and yelped piercingly until one of the outriders killed it with his sword.

On the way back, she noticed Rufus's daughter sitting in a corner of the courtyard, almost hidden behind the carriages. Drusilla hesitated; she really did not have time, but she went to the child and sat down beside her. They were almost the same height. "Well, what is it, has someone been cruel to you?"

"No, it isn't that."

"Then it must be something else. You may as well tell me."

The child bit her lip. "Will he be different afterward?"

"After the ceremony? No, there's nothing magical about it. The ceremony won't change him."

"Nanny says it will."

"Nanny is a fool. Your father will be just the same to you as he always was, no better, no worse. Besides, you'll be going to school next year. Will you like that?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I'm afraid."

"And your breasts hurt? And you wake up sometimes in the night, and cry?"

"Yes. Grandmother, sometimes I'm afraid of *everything*." Tears filled her eyes, and she leaned against Drusilla.

The closeness of the sweaty young body called up memories; it was

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pleasant and repugnant at the same time. Drusilla said, "Do you remember when you were much younger, how you were afraid of things that don't frighten you now?"

The girl's head nodded. "But then I was a baby."

"The rest will be just the same. We're always afraid before something happens, and then we see that it was nothing. When you go to bed, tell yourself, 'This won't matter by tomorrow night.' "

The girl released her and smiled. "I'll try. Thank you, Grandmother."

Drusilla arose and went into the colonnade, where the household and all the guests were gathering. It was a little before the tenth hour. One of the priest's assistants walked out into the garden, stood in front of the Janus hut, and beat a gong for silence. Then the second assistant appeared, carrying the sacred implements. These were wrapped to conceal them from profane eyes, but it was not hard to see what Drusilla already knew, that one was a rod, one a basin, one a lantern, and the fourth a sword. The assistants entered the hut and came out empty-handed. One of them went to the kitchen and returned with two jugs, which he deposited inside the hut as well.

Then the priest appeared with Rufus, who was wearing a robe so tattered and dirty that he must have borrowed it from the cook. The priest was carrying a bundle that Drusilla recognized: it was the new toga made from wool spun, dyed, and woven here on the estate.

Rufus conferred with the priest a moment; then the priest and the two assistants closed around him and marched him into the hut while the guests and household looked on.

The hide curtain fell, and there was silence, but Drusilla remembered and knew what was going on in the darkness. First they would strip him bare, and make him sit on a low stool between them, with the priest in front and the slaves behind. They would let him wait a while.

Now the priest would be saying, "In this warm water were you born naked, and this milk was your first food." Here the slaves drenched Rufus with water from the basin, then pulled his head back and poured milk into his face.

"These bitter herbs made you weep." One of the slaves would rub a paste of onions and garlic into his eyes. "Weep now for your first childhood, your first youth and your first manhood, for they are done. Out of the darkness you came . . ." (here the slave uncovered the lantern and shone it into his face) ". . . and into the darkness you go . . ." (the slave covered the lamp again), ". . . but not until you have had your second manhood, your second youth and your second childhood."

Blinded and weeping, he was made to get up and stand on the stool. "You stand now at the summer of your life, looking backward and looking forward. This moment will not come again. Remember it."

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Then a blow on the back that made him cry out (they heard the cry where they stood watching), and the salt rubbed into the wound. (Another cry, more anguished than the first.)

Now the slave would be wiping his face with a cloth dipped in water, then drying it until he could see again.

"Will you loyally serve the tribe, your family, your household, and the city and empire? Think before you speak." Here the lantern was opened again, and the second slave held up his sword.

"Do you know and understand the penalty for breaking this oath?"

He would respond, as he had been taught, "If I break this oath, I must be cut off from tribe, family, household, city, and empire."

"Remember it." Another blow, another rubbing of salt. This time he was silent. Good.

"Will you serve the gods of your mothers, never blaspheming or neglecting them?"

"I will."

A third blow, the last. The priest would dip another cloth in the basin and begin to wash his body. "In this water I wash away your old life and begin the new."

Now the slaves would be dressing him in the toga sapientis with its purple, green, and white stripes. "Wear this garment in token of new life. From this day you join the company of men, women, and gods."

The door of the hut opened, and here he was now, looking splendid in his new toga, but sober and red-eyed. The guests surged into the garden and surrounded him. When her turn came, Drusilla embraced him and said a word or two. "Thanks," said Rufus, seeming to look beyond her. Then the press of people forced her out, and she went back to the colonnade.

The priest was there, pulling off his gloves. "It went very well, very well," he was saying. "Might I have a drop of something to drink?"

One of the slaves dipped him a cup of tempered wine; he poured a little on the ground and drank the rest thirstily. "It's dry work, you know," he said.

Because of the unexpected guests the dining room was more crowded than was proper; even though most of the local people were being fed outside, there were twelve at table, four on each side. Luckily Serena and Drusilla were together at the head couch. "At last we can talk," Drusilla said. "Tell me all your news."

"Well, I wrote you last year that I was going to Jerusalem to visit Gaius, didn't I?"

"Yes, but I never heard a word afterward, until somebody told me you were safely back in Rome."

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"And lucky to get there, too; the ship just before mine was lost in the Internal Sea."

"Thank the gods it wasn't yours, but you always were lucky. How did you like Judea?"

"Well, I'd been there before, of course. It's not so bad, apart from the natives. Do you remember that Jew who was sent to Rome and crucified about five years ago?"

"Which one?"

"Jeshua, the one who prophesied the end of the world and said the Emperor ought to repent."

"They all say that. What about him?"

"Well, they cut him down when he had finished his time, of course, and sent him home in fair condition to Buggerall or wherever he came from, but now his followers are saying that he died on the cross and then came back to life."

"How absurd. Does anyone believe that?"

"Only his little clique, but they're all loud and abusive. We may have to round them up and crucify a few more to teach them manners."

"It won't work. Well, what did you do when you got back to Rome?"

"I was just in time for the farewell to Cloaca—pardon me, I mean, of course, Clodia."

"Oh, yes, I heard she was due. Were many people there?"

Serena smiled. "The consul attended, and about half the Committee, and the G.G. knows who. The temple was full, there must have been at least a thousand people outside. Everybody was smiling when they left."

"She *was* an awful person."

"Yes, and her daughters are just like her, I'm afraid. Well, and what is life going to be for you now?"

"Whatever Rufus chooses to make of it."

Serena looked at her keenly. "When things get too much for you, come and visit me. Promise."

"Yes, I promise. You're a good friend, Serena. The last one I have."

"Let us be all the closer then."

After the first course of little cakes, herbs, and cheeses, the slaves brought around thrushes and songbirds, sugared pork, ham, cutlets, goose, and fat hen. Rufus began drinking wine without water, and when the dessert came he was singing joyfully.

Afterward, when the eating stopped but the drinking went on, Drusilla took Serena away to her room. In the light of a single lamp, they sat listening to the sounds of revelry. "Seven is a banquet, nine is a brawl," Serena quoted.

"Well, Rufus was worried. Men take these things too seriously. Do you remember, when the boys were practicing with their javelins, how we

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used to wade down the brook, and try to catch rivernymphs in the shallows?"

"Yes, and we collected the brightest pebbles and took them home in baskets. What did you do with yours?"

"I kept them in a bowl of water to look at, but of course I had to throw them out when I dedicated all my toys to the Lar."

"You look just as you did then. It gave me a queer feeling when I saw you."

"And I you. It seems a long time ago."

"Except in sleep."

"Do you dream of those days too?"

"Often, lately. Were we as happy then as I think?"

"Probably not. Memory gilds everything, doesn't it?"

"Well, not *everything*. When I dream about Father, he's as awful as ever."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do know. And nobody else understands; that's very sad in a way, isn't it?"

After a moment the door opened and the butler looked in. "Pardon, mistress, but your son is ill and Calpurnia has gone to bed with orders not to disturb her."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He is vomiting, and can't be roused."

"Bring him here."

The butler withdrew and came back; behind him were four men carrying Rufus; he was groaning and white-faced. "He looks poisoned to me," Serena said. "You'd better have your slaves tortured just to make sure."

"He drank too much. It's not the first time."

"As you wish," Serena yawned. "I'm for bed, then, it's been a long day."

Alone with Rufus, she sent for purgatives, and made him vomit again and again. After all, it was possible, even likely, that slaves had put something in his wine, but torturing them would prove nothing. Toward dawn, when he fell into a natural sleep, she left him, crossed the silent courtyard, unbarred the door, and slipped out into darkness. It was about the eleventh hour of night; except for a cock crowing in the farmyard, the world was empty.

When she was halfway down to the bridge, she heard a distant discordant trumpeting overhead. Up there, so high that they were in daylight although the rest of the world was dark, two Vs of white cranes were flying home to Africa. She stood without moving until they were gone.

Under the bridge she removed her sandals, tied up her robe and stepped into the fast shallow water. The pebbles were unexpectedly hard

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to her bare feet. She walked downstream between arching willows and ferns that dropped icy sprays on her fingers.

Soon enough she found the little streamside meadow where she and Serena had often sat plaiting wreaths of flowers. She climbed up on the bank and dried her feet with grass. She was shivering, and wished she had brought her cloak, but it was glorious to be here, alone, out of sight and sound of the whole world.

As she sat there, the sky gradually brightened, then dawn came in streamers of copper and red, the sun rose higher, gilding the willows, and she could hardly breathe, and now, now, light touched the brook and laid bare all the wonders under the rushing ice-clear water: the pebbles of brown, green, and ivory, the threads of grass, the many-legged river-nymphs hiding in the shadows. ●

LULLABY FOR RECENT SETTLERS ON STARFALL FIVE

Bloodfrogs are croaking in the trees,
the night is mild;
their songs lie on it like a net of lace.
The moons, in three parts of the sky,
make contradictory shadows
of the trees.
Nothing is as simple as it seems.
Newcomers, strangers,
cramped for so long in your ships,
tempted by the mildness of the night,
do not let your babies sleep outside.
Bloodfrogs are croaking in the trees.
Nothing here is as simple as it seems.

—William John Watkins

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art: Dell Harris

SUMMER AND ICE

Alexander Jablokov

The author tells us that although he had thought out much of the story line for "Summer and Ice," it sat in an unfinished state for a long time. Then his editor at AvoNova, John Douglas, "told me about a story idea he'd already given to several writers: an alien invasion of Earth that is the equivalent to Vietnam, with massive repercussions back on the home planet. Everything clicked then.... John had said that while other authors had used his idea, the result was never much like his original suggestion. I think that's happened again, and that John's little seed pearl can still be given out to others." Mr. Jablokov, who recently returned from his honeymoon in Turkey, is now at work on a novel version of "Syrtis" (*Asimov's*, April 1994).

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Acceleration reached through the thin skin of the lifepod and crushed Steve Hardt flat. The Jugur ship was performing some high-g evasive maneuver. He could feel the roar as it contacted the outer atmosphere. Steve did a last check of his reentry suit's functions and wished that there had been some other way of returning home to Earth than attached to the outside of an attacking alien warship.

Trajectory data slithered across the reentry suit's helmet display. After a year stuck to the hull disguised as part of the superconducting heat-transfer piping, invisible to the crew of the spaceship, it was time to part company. Steve relaxed his muscles and closed his eyes. The lifepod blew clear.

Behind his closed eyelids, the data feed kaleidoscoped images into his optic nerve. He'd learned to juggle the images mentally, just like a Jugur eyemouth. From cameras on the structure-tangled ship surface: the tiny lifepod floated up and vanished into the unmoving stars. From the front of the lifepod interior: a mirrored figure without a face slumped like a miscast statue. From one external pod angle: the Jugur ship began to segment under attack. From another pod angle: the glow of reentry and below, the Earth.

The Earth. Five years since he had seen it, two years subjective travel time back and forth and three years on the planet Jugurtha itself. Five years subjective and, through the inexorable mathematics of lightspeed transition travel, thirty years objective. The place was desperately changed. The ice fields had extended far to the south. The northern hemisphere was almost clear of clouds, and the snow and ice glinted in the sun.

Steve felt himself trying to stare, as if he could control the cameras through force of will. But he saw nothing with his own eyes, and the cameras had been programmed by the independent Jugur eyemouths that had made his trip to and from Jugurtha possible. He could see bright streaks at the limb of the Earth as the warship's independently maneuvering segments hit the atmosphere. A bright flash: Earth's defensive lasers were still operational, and one had found its target.

Steve was a target too. He tried to curl up into a ball, but the suit wouldn't let him. What would the reaction be back on Jugurtha if the eyemouth cameras showed him gloriously burning up in Earth's atmosphere? He would become another tragic media hero, but his political effect would be nil. If he was going to die, he had to do it more effectively. He cleared his thoughts. That came later.

The outer layer of the reentering pod peeled off. A stabilized camera floated up with it, and Steve could see the lifepod as it drilled toward the planet. A giant frame wing suddenly puffed out above the pod, turning

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it into a stratospheric hang glider. He couldn't see any serious damage. The camera tumbled away and went blind.

He dropped westward over Europe. Behind him, just at the horizon, he could see the vast craters of the comet strike in the center of Eurasia. Nothing now lived east of the Urals. One comet fragment had doubled the size of the Aral Sea, another had vaporized Novosibirsk. And, under the cloak of cometary dust, the glaciers marched down from the north once again. Thirty years. This was not the world he had left. He was here to defend a place he no longer knew anything about.

Still, the blue, green, and white globe brought him a sharp joy. He could feel the cool breeze from it. He wanted to reach out his arms and embrace it. He would be free of the high gravity of Jugurtha, free of the incessant Jugurjur negotiators, free of the constant media surveillance that been part of his contract with the eyemouths, free to find out if Karinth Tolback was still alive. Karinth . . . .

He let her rest on the surface of his thoughts like a drop of dew on a leaf. She'd been alive when he left Jugurtha, but that had been almost fifteen of her years ago. Wadded in his right hand he held a piece of string. He and Karinth had burned string, that last day, to mark their parting, but he had kept this, all the way to Jugurtha and back. How mad she would be if she knew! He smiled to himself. She'd always suspected that his little rituals were just a way of gaining advantage over the situation.

Ahead, America was still shaded before dawn. The sun was just coming up on the ice packs around Nova Scotia. Farther south the coast was edged with gray: continental shelf revealed by the dropping water level.

His cameras flared and went dead. The image feeds were destroyed, and blackness spread from inside his head. An instant later, heat seared his left side. He tried to scream into his breather, but it forced the sound back into his throat. He was cooking, the skin was crisping up, black . . . the suit cooled his burned skin with anaesthetic. He'd been hit by a defensive orbital laser. He twitched a muscle, and was relieved to find that his left arm still existed.

Auxiliary eyes, lower resolution, opened. It took Steve a moment to correlate the images. He was surrounded by a shimmering glow, an aurora, as energy-absorbing shielding boiled off the pod and formed an ionized cloud. The wing folded, dropping him on a random downward path, and the cloud stayed above him to serve as a decoy for further laser attacks.

Steve sucked hot air through his throat. Didn't the defenders of Earth know he had come back to help? He felt like shouting at them. They had traced the approaching warship as it decelerated from translight speed,

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its mass appearing on their screens as an invisible hand knotting gravitational geodesics. They knew it was coming with military resupply for the Stoop, the independent Jugur organization that had invaded Earth. The human military forces were fighting desperately for survival, unconcerned with the complexities of intra-Jugur politics on Jugurtha, or the clarity of the images supplied to the home market by the Jugur eyemouths.

"Here I am," Steve whispered into his air supply. "Let me live, goddamit."

His descent slowed, and he hung above the slowly dawn-lit continent. As the minutes went by and no further laser attack came, he relaxed the painful muscles between his shoulders. Examining the ground through the auxiliary optics, he traced the path of the Mississippi up from the Gulf of Mexico. The Illinois river split off there, heading northeast, toward the gleaming ice of the Great Lakes . . . and there, on the shore of Lake Michigan, was the city of Chicago. He imagined he could see its towers casting shadows across the plains.

He hummed to himself, like a child eating a favorite food. Until he'd found it, he hadn't even been sure of what he was looking for. He and Karinth had lived in Chicago, together in those last days before his departure. He remembered their town house, the sun shining pale overhead through veils of atmospheric dust. They had stayed inside and made love while the world grew colder.

Five subjective years had passed for him, but thirty for her. Did it make sense, to search for her there, as if she had been sitting and waiting for him, there at the breakfast table with her head turned away, a piece of burned string in her hand?

Of course it did. In response to his thought, the suit gazed down, pattern matching. The natural features were the same: the Appalachians, the curve of the Ohio. The human ones had changed. The unplowed roads had the reflectance of open fields. Outlying houses and villages had been burned and abandoned, and showed no IR signatures. Broken-spined bridges rested their spans in the ice. After some meditation, the suit found enough visible-light matches to guide him.

Feeling an entirely inappropriate exhilaration, Steve Hardt floated toward Earth.

The reentry suit's mirrored surface was scarred and pitted. It lay, a discarded insect carapace, in the snow, surrounded by chunks of the disintegrated pod, while Steve Hardt, swearing under his breath and shivering in the unaccustomed cold, hammered on a recalcitrant joint on the glidewing. The wing was supposed to convert neatly to a snow sledge for his equipment, but it was resisting, making him wonder if the crash

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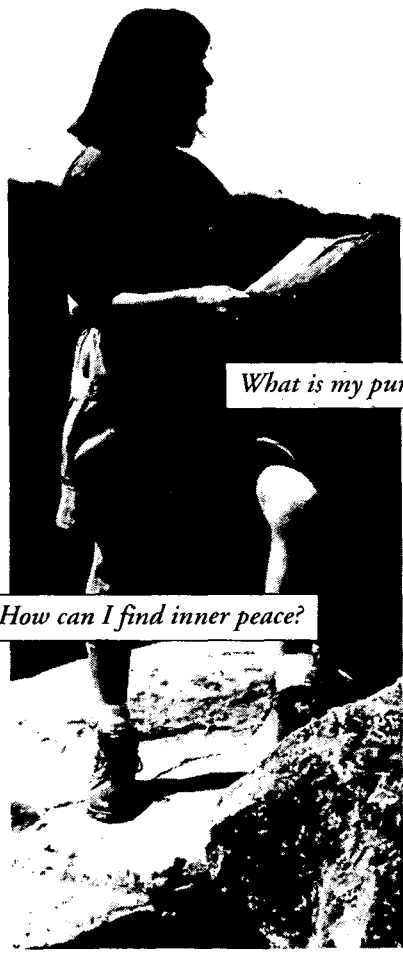

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had damaged it. Surely the planners on the Jugurjur had known he would crash. He wondered if an eyemouth camera was carefully recording his frustration.

At least they'd given him a hammer with the tool kit. He pulled it back to hit as hard as he could, then stopped. Karinth had always thought he had a dysfunctional relationship with mechanical devices. What had she said once? He remembered her sitting cross-legged, her slender fingers covered with gritty grease, bicycle parts neatly arranged in front of her. " 'One dollar for hitting. Ninety-nine dollars for knowing where to hit.' Know where to hit, Steve." He'd almost destroyed that damn bicycle trying to unstick the derailleur. He paused for a moment and looked more closely at the framework. A simple rotating part had been yanked from its socket. Steve tapped it gently. With a groan of bent struts, the wing tip folded under and clicked into slots on the runner. Steve sat back on his haunches and breathed a sigh of relief. Thanks again, Karinth.

Behind him, at the end of a slanting tunnel marked by broken branches and shattered tree trunks, was the sky. He'd plowed through this maple copse and embedded himself deeply in the soft central Illinois soil. It had taken him a good hour to dig his way out of his suit, like a metamorphosing grub emerging from the dirt. Another hour, and he'd be ready to move out, to the northeast. He'd missed Chicago by a good two hundred kilometers. Not too bad, he supposed, after a journey of eighteen light years, all the way from Eta Cassiopeiae A. It seemed that if he stood and looked back up the path he'd ripped through the trees, he should be able to see the sun of Jugurtha.

It had glowed in the dark sky above the meeting ground of the Jugurjur, its dimmer companion, Eta Cassiopeiae B, just visible in the sky in the east, over the mountains that thrust their way up through the jungle.

"The Stoop was created for a specific purpose," old Bardudur said. "The invasion of Earth. You must forgive me, but it made sense at the time." He drew breath through his long, high snout. It had fallen in on either side of the long nasal bone, a sign of his great age. "But now, even among the Jugur of the Stoop, there is pressure for a change."

Wincing, Steve took another bite of the decaying meat on the plate. He'd throw up later, in the privacy of his own quarters. The Jugur were light-boned and delicate, nothing like predators, and their food was never fresh.

"But why?" Steve said. "Why did they do it in the first place?"

Bardudur put his hands on either side of Hardt's face and held him with delicate, rubbery pads.

"An expedition to conquer parts of a fertile, if ecologically damaged planet—a good risk. The Stoop would hold their areas, the natives would

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hold other areas, war would be low-level but continuous. A pleasant life. The Stoop represents something we like in ourselves. But you try to annihilate them. This they do not enjoy."

The Jugur as a species were not territorial, and the idea of conquering only parts of a planet didn't seem odd to them. Their emotional attachment was to organizations like the Stoop. It had taken Steve a long time to understand that the Jugur that had invaded Earth were an independent group, far from being representatives of the central government of all Jugur. No such entity truly existed, though the Jugurjur, a huge debating society, came the closest.

"And you think we can push them harder," Steve said. "Push them off Earth."

He looked up at the endless ranks of carved stone chairs that surrounded the tiny party picnicking on the Jugurjur meeting ground. There were thousands of them, and each was different. They climbed up into the hills. Each was the seat of an organization, some vanished for centuries. The chairs remained, for they represented the traditions of the race. The Stoop had a chair, a new one. Steve had examined it, but had not been permitted to sit in it.

"We will do our best, friend Hardt," Bardudur had replied. But, of course, beyond smuggling Steve onto a Stoop supply ship heading back to Earth, the Jugurjur had decided to do absolutely nothing. It was up to Steve Hardt and the eyemouths to convince them otherwise, and Steve didn't like thinking about how far he might have to go to do so.

The field to Steve's left was alive. He'd been pulling his sledge through undisturbed white fields for three days, but here bright green lettuce poked jauntily through the snow, leaves covered with waxy insulation. Snow slumped around them, melted from underneath. Steve stopped. He didn't know how things were on Earth these days, but if this was a functioning farm, it made sense that it was defended. In that case, he had already been detected. It wouldn't pay to seem any more a threat than he actually was. He detached the sledge pull and stayed still. The frozen expanse of what he had identified as the Fox River stretched to his right.

The sun was setting, and, one by one, the reflecting satellites appeared in a line across the sky. They were, Steve figured, huge circles of mylar set to reflect sunlight down onto the night side of Earth. Jugur? Human? With such a technology, there was no way to tell. Together, they gave more light than a full moon, and had made setting up camp in the evening much easier. Someone unconcerned with aesthetics had banished night.

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Within a couple of minutes he heard the whine of an electric snowmobile. It whizzed bouncing through the snow and took up a position screened by underbrush. It crouched like a cyborg centaur, the driver's long dark coat blending amid the tree trunks.

"Stand back!" the woman barked. "Do not approach any closer." A short, wide-muzzled gun pointed at his face. "Now!"

Steve stopped in wonder at himself. He had been stumbling through the snow toward her with desperate need. His arms were stretched out to pull her to him and hold her. He dropped them to his sides. Pulse pounded in his ears. He could barely see the woman's face beneath the hood and goggles.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "It's been five years. I haven't seen a . . . human being in five years. Please."

"What do you want?" Her mouth was a thin line on her face. She wasn't Karinth. Nothing at all like Karinth.

Steve slowed his breathing. "I need to find entities to negotiate with. The military commanders in the war against the Stoop. I come from Jugurtha."

She didn't react to this astonishing claim. "Approach the farmhouse on this road. One point five kilometers. Do not deviate. If you attempt to produce weapons, you will be killed."

"Wait!"

She backed and vanished with a mosquito sound. Steve was alone again. He shrugged back into his harness and pulled the suddenly heavier sledge up the road.

The next thing he heard was the sound of laughter. He was passing two greenhouses that seemed to be made of ice sheets. Huge green leaves spread luxuriously within, as if trapped by a glacier. Below, at the base of the hill, was a pond.

The ice had been broken through and lay in stacked slabs by the side of the water. Children frolicked there, like seals. They were swollen and sleek, their eyes hidden behind flaps of skin. Steve recognized them as human only through an effort. They yelped and squealed with pleasure, in water not a degree above freezing.

"Nice seconds today," Adalti said to Karinth. His long-snouted Jugur face disappeared from the screen, replaced by an overhead shot of an alley. Snow-covered cornices at different heights made an intricate pattern of overlapping gray-and-white rectangles, a pleasing frame to the deadly battle going on below.

"It was a smooth ambush," Karinth said. She sat in her chair with a glass of water and watched the fight clinically, seeking to learn something from her close escape. "They hung themselves up in the rafters of

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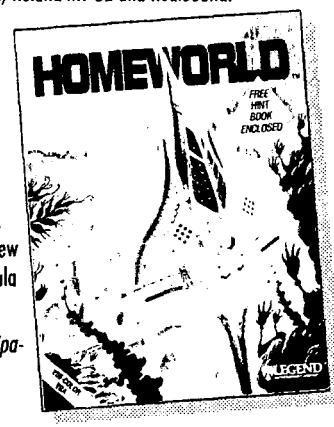

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an abandoned grocery store. IR showed nothing. No carbon dioxide. They must have been recirculating their air."

"Why were you out there?" Adalti asked.

Other cameras had been positioned at the alley end, in the second-floor window of an apartment, out on a stalk from a sewer grate. Had Adalti been warned of the ambush ahead of time? She never knew, and the nature of their arrangement did not allow her to ask. In general, though, Adalti was ready for anything, and he moved faster than anyone she'd ever met. If he'd been heading the Stoop, rather than being an eyemouth, she suspected that the war would have been over long ago. The angles were crisply intercut.

"What?" The ambushers dropped from the ceiling, through the rotted acoustic paneling, and burst out of the plate glass window. Shards tumbled through the air. For an instant, a rainbow flickered in the glass rain. Had Adalti added it? Nice touch. Karinth watched herself drop to the left, fire a quick shot over her shoulder, then vault over a burnt car hulk. Good. Aside from letting herself get caught in the first place, there was nothing to find fault with.

"Why were you out there?" Adalti repeated. "There was no need for you to be on that side of the river."

Her pursuers were human beings, of course. The nearest Stoop Jugur were in central Wisconsin. The southern half of Lake Michigan was extremely well defended. She dropped and slid on the ice-covered pavement, heading for a basement window. At the last instant she pushed a foot off next to the window and rolled back to her feet. Karinth remembered that instant of "oh, shit" fear. The window, an escape route she'd plotted out on previous trips through the area, had been too dark, the reflections behind it wrong. The basement was a trap with someone waiting inside it. A shot of her face. It showed no particular expression. A leathery old face, one that had experienced things like this a dozen times.

"I was . . . " she said. "I was . . . I needed to take a walk. Some fresh air. I *hate* being cooped up in here, you know that."

"Of course. You don't like being safe."

Her pursuers had hung back just a little too far, anxious to see her sucked up into the maw of the basement. Patriotic scum, she thought, as she watched them move toward her. All Jugur were alike to them, all enemies: Stoop, eyemouth, the hypothetical Jugur of the home planet. These humans and the Stoop together would turn the Earth into a sterile wasteland.

She jumped off a car roof, grabbed a window frame, and swung herself up. For some reason, she found herself seeing herself differently than she ever had before. She was a tough, efficient cylinder with arms and

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legs. Her hooded head was a bullet. She was meant to wear insulating clothes and body armor. A camisole . . . why should she remember a camisole? It had been thirty years. Thirty real goddam years.

"That's not it, Adalti. You know that."

"Why *now*, today, Karinth Tolback? It was just a random attack, they might have missed you, you might have taken another route. The chances were good that nothing would happen to you. Take a walk. But why were you out there?"

"Damn you, Adalti, I—" She watched herself fire down from the window. Two of them, caught right out in the street like practice targets. The others ducked and dove, and she was through the second floor of the apartment building and out the other side and she didn't stop moving until she got back here, to the center of the defenses provided for her by the Great Lakes Consortium.

"You know why," she said, finally. "I wanted to look up at the sky. I wanted to think." She paused to breathe. "Do you have any stuff of him coming down?"

Stars spangled the screen. It could have been stock footage: a reentry pod, a glidewing, a long slide down into the center of the continent. It could have been anyone in that pod. Anyone at all. The pod crashed through trees, sending shattered branches and snow flying. The scene cut. A man climbed out of the pod's ruins and stood next to it, staring up at the sky, his feet once again on his native planet.

Karinth Tolback had been married twice. She had had one daughter. Her right shoulder joint was completely artificial. It still hurt, late at night. She'd lived an entire life, several. He was back again. After thirty years, Steve Hardt was back.

The sun had been pale on the day Steve left the Earth, a burning sore seen through layers of gauze: a comet sky. As the sun sank toward evening, it lit the entire western sky with flame, and Steve stopped for a moment on the street outside Karinth's house to watch it.

"Hurry up, come in," Karinth said from an upper window. She leaned out. She'd fluffed her short dark hair and wore a loose dressing gown over a lace-trimmed camisole. "Don't just stand out there."

"I'm in, I'm in."

She flounced her hair and silently slid the window shut, disappearing in a golden reflection.

Steve opened the wrought-iron gate and ran up the wood stairs to the second-floor entrance of the old building. The sunsets upset her. To him they were just beautiful, but she could not look at them without thinking of the comet crash that was their cause, and the ice that was its necessary consequence.

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The entire white-painted front of the house glowed rose and the street trees cast bluish shadows on it. A brass knocker shaped like a lion's head gleamed on the door. Burning clouds sailed overhead. He and Karinth had reached final agreement with the Jugur eyemouths through their main contact, Adalti. In return for control over his image, they would transport Steve to Jugurtha aboard an eyemouth vessel and put him in contact with the Jugurjur. The eyemouths had no chair on the Jugurjur meeting ground, and never would. But, as Adalti said, the only reason everyone in Jugur-controlled space knew what the meeting ground looked like was because of the eyemouths.

A last furtive glance over his shoulder at the sun, a turn of the brass door handle, and Steve was inside the house. Karinth was in the kitchen, stirring a pot. She'd put a kitchen apron over her peignoir, a sacrifice of grace to practicality that made her more beautiful than ever.

"Wait!" she said. Then: "at least let me put down the spoon. No, on the spoon rest. There." And a while later: "lucky for you I keep my kitchen floor so clean."

"Clean enough to screw off of," he said. "How traditionalist of you."

Dinner wasn't even ruined, though the asparagus was soft enough to spread on crackers. They sat silently at the candle-lit dining-room table. Steve watched the flicker of her hooped earrings. She served dinner in her camisole, having carefully smoothed out the creases, and he admired the fullness of her body, which curved with smooth languidness. After this night he would never touch it again, not this body, it would be years gone . . . .

"Will you remember me?" he asked.

"Steve!" she looked at him, serious. "You promised we wouldn't talk about that."

"Well," he said. "I lied."

She choked, uncertain about whether to laugh or to cry, and turned away. "You know the answer. Why are you asking?"

"I don't know," he said, finally. "Maybe it's because I feel like I'm running away, leaving you to face . . . I don't know, war, ice, time. All of it. This world will be hell . . . . No, that's not it at all. I'm running away, and I'm still *afraid*, dammit, Karinth, I'm still afraid."

"We've been over it, Steve. You're not running away. You're doing your *job*. I think we can trust Adalti and his eyemouths." Then she looked at him. "That's not what I meant. You have a right to be afraid. You'll be the only human being for eighteen light years. That's scary. But I'll survive here. At any rate, I'll do my best. Don't worry."

He slumped his shoulders, letting the air out, then chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, right. I won't worry. You know, Adalti says I'll be a major star on

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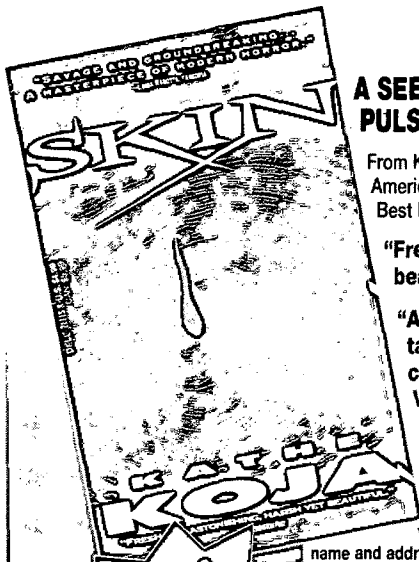

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Jugurtha. Everyone will know me. The eyemouths will cover my every move."

She didn't say anything more, so he reached across the table and took her hand. He wanted to make love to her again, but he felt drained, as if his body had nothing to say to him anymore. Maybe he'd be able to show her he loved her one more time before the night was through. He'd meant the last time to be so calm and intense and here he'd just jumped on her in the kitchen, as if they had endless time ahead of them.

"Come on," he had said. "I want you to go to sleep on me. Can you do that?"

"I can do that." Head down, she had followed him to the bedroom.

Now Steve sat and stared out through the ice at the hollow night. The snow gleamed in the light of the orbital mirrors, streaked with bony multiple shadows. The mirrors were part of an environmental war, he'd learned. The Jugur sought to cool the Earth, the humans to warm it. Orbital battles swarmed around the mirrors.

"There are all sorts of modifications," Dr. Saleh said. Steve's question had been unexpected, and had made her nervous. "Since you've left. For example, an internal blood heater controlled by the hypothalamus, surgically installed in the heart's interventricular septum, the power socket at the manubrium of the sternum." She prodded sharp fingers at the tip of Steve's sternum, just below his throat. "Plug in, you can survive being frozen in a block of ice."

"Those children—"

She shook her head. "Something else. Foamed adipose tissue. Closed cell. Better than any insulation in nature. Now please stop moving around." She vacuumed dead skin from Steve Hardt's arm with a rubbery nozzle. "Does this hurt? Good, excellent. Radiation didn't get all your basal cells. Easy regrowth."

Steve didn't look at her, but continued staring out at the snow. Two puffily insulated skiers slid through the trees. Why did he feel so empty? He'd held her so close for five years. Why should the news that Karinth was still alive make her evaporate from his arms?

"She's still in Chicago," Steve said. "Still in the same place."

"She is." Saleh had come to the farm at Lower Fox a few days after Steve's arrival. Aside from being a medico, she represented the Great Lakes Consortium, the military organization directing the fight against the Stoop in the middle of the North American continent. "Karinth Tolback is an independent operator, contracting to Great Lakes. She provides a link to the Jugur eyemouths. It's an . . . ambiguous position."

"Like mine."

"Just so."

Steve couldn't remember meeting Karinth. It was as if he had known

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her for a long time when he finally recognized who she was. They had all lived in multicolored domed tents on heights near Ararat, the team combined to communicate with the aliens that had been dropped across the snowy expanse of eastern Anatolia. Odd aliens with vestigial wings beneath their arms, who said they were refugees, fleeing war on a distant planet. Suddenly knowing Karinth Tolback was just part of the discovery of that time. It made galactic conflagration seem a thing of joy, something to backlight a love affair.

"So, can you do it?" He'd asked Saleh the question immediately upon learning that Karinth was still alive. "The modification? It is possible. I'm sure it is."

"It's not a physiological problem with you," Dr. Saleh said to him. "I don't think it's any sort of problem at all. I've performed all the tests. Your sexual responsiveness is completely normal. You are not in any way dysfunctional. A few difficulties from your isolation. Perfectly normal."

"I don't need you to tell me that. I need you to tell me if you can perform the modification."

Rising up around the examination table were branches suspending apples, pears, and peaches, though instead of tree trunks they had pencil-thin rods of tubule-filled composite.

Since his encounter with the guard on the snowmobile, Steve had not wanted to look at anyone. It was as if all the people of Lower Fox were the same as the dying people he had seen on the screens on Jugurtha day after day, like figures on some immense, tragic ceremonial frieze. For five years, that was what human beings had been to him. Eyemouth interpretations had made them heroes, vermin, innocent victims, whichever was the fashion at the moment, but still, all they had been able to do was die for the camera, blown apart by the coolly efficient Jugur that made up the Stoop. These people here at Lower Fox talked to him, even touched him, but they didn't seem at all real.

"Do you think it necessary?" Saleh's voice was clipped.

"I do."

They needed him. He could feel it. He had fallen from the sky bearing a message from the Jugurjur to the Stoop, or so his evidence showed. Saleh had spent the better part of a week examining it. After thirty years of war, the human military resistance could not afford to pass up any negotiation. Steve Hardt represented a chance for stability.

"I can do it. I can give you that control over your sexual drive. If that's what you want. Then—"

"Then I will come up to Chicago and negotiate. Great Lakes has to set up a contact with the Stoop, so that I can convey the Jugurjur's message in the appropriate manner. Agreed?"

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"Agreed." Saleh was clearly much more than a mere doctor if she could make that sort of agreement without consulting anyone else.

Slowly, Steve turned his head to look at her. Dr. Saleh was a wizened, dark-skinned woman, sharp of feature and sharp of movement. Her thinning hair was hidden under a turban. When Steve had left the Earth, she had been a young woman. Now she was old, as sharp and hard as a wood letter opener.

"I'll make the arrangements," she said. She was angry. And why shouldn't she be, when the last, best hope of Earth wanted a physiological modification to turn him into a voluntary sex maniac?

Some time later, devices lowered themselves to his skin. Was that a tingle, a vibration, or just an illusion? He looked out at the snow while Saleh fussed intently over her gadgets. She'd explained about the cingulate gyrus, the hippocampus, the neurotransmitter control, the parasympathetic nervous system, but he hadn't wanted to listen. Lush fruit hung down heavy over him where he lay. The peaches were so ripe that their sweet juice was squeezing out of their flesh and beading on their softly curving surfaces.

He found himself looking at Saleh, filling his eyes with her body. She was a small woman, skinny and dark. She was beautiful. Her small breasts curved out against her businesslike dress, and he could see the tightness of her bottom as she turned to adjust something. He imagined her skin sliding against his, the soft warmth of it, and the flicking of her sharp tongue down his stomach, past his navel. She reached over him to touch some control and he grabbed her, pulled her against him.

Agony flared in his gut and he curled around it. Having jabbed him efficiently in the solar plexus with stiffened fingers, Saleh stood back a few feet from the couch and watched him analytically. He sucked in a painful breath.

"Sorry," he managed.

"Learn to control it. Now. Close it down."

Slowly, his blood cooled. He felt as if he had only just crawled out of his lifepod to breathe the air. He blinked at her. "Okay."

"You leave tomorrow morning," she said. "A convoy up the Illinois. I'll make the arrangements."

"Fine, fine." Despite himself, he watched her leave. Beyond the ice window, the gentle snow curved under the trees like a woman's skin stroked by the night.

Karinth remembered perfectly the first time she had seen Steve Hardt. She and the rest of the team had been trying to communicate with the Jugur refugees for over a month. The sun was creeping over the hills to the east, and they all stood, huddled up, watching the line of light work

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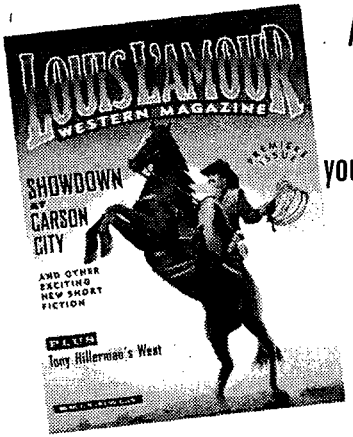

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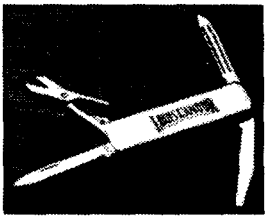

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its way toward them across the grass. The cook stove was hissing, and that morning's crew was hard at work with the oatmeal. The foreign smell of maple sugar penetrated the Anatolian highlands.

New team members had arrived during the night. Karinth noted with annoyance that one of them had plopped his dome tent right across the easiest trail to the latrine. As she glared at it, it shook like a hatching egg, and a man crawled out of it. Something—his sleeping bag, probably—grabbed at his leg. He shook it off, then stood up. He ran his fingers through his wild hair, vainly trying to smooth it, noticed she was looking at him, and smiled.

She and Steve first made love on a flat rock in the sun, high above a valley. She had climbed up there to sunbathe, in one of her few free hours. He followed to bring her the canteen she had forgotten. She would never have forgotten something as essential as a canteen, but there it had been, hanging on a broken-off tree branch, and it had been the simplest thing in the world for him to grab it and carry it up to her so that she wouldn't be thirsty there in the hot sun.

Steve marked their moving into the same tent together with a little ritual, as was his habit. After letting her choose her side of the tent, he sat cross-legged on the floor and fed her, like an Arab, then insisted she feed him. She laughed and got food all over his face. Then he gave her a tiny amulet with a blue eye in it, something to ward off the evil eye. It hung up near her bed and winked at her.

She rolled out of bed, turning away from the eye. Steve was part of her past. A big part, a good part, but the past, nevertheless. They had agreed to understand that. They had both agreed.

Her encapsulated space was below where her old basement had been. Waste heat got ducted through superconducting heat pipes to sinks blocks away. She still went up into the house once in a while, but it wasn't really safe up there, even with the military protection her neighborhood had. The risk was less the Stoop than other human beings. The walls were perforated by heavy-caliber fire. She had patched and sealed them, for neatness' sake.

It made no sense to think about him. It made sense to think about Arnold, if she was going to think about someone. There was nothing of her second husband in this apartment, and they'd been married for five years. He'd moved her away, out to the open fields of Iowa to lead a nomadic, military life. Surviving there had meant shaking down the human farmers as well as fighting the Stoop. She remembered sitting behind the machine gun of an assault vehicle in the cooling days of the early fall, watching rye being pumped out of a gun-turret-surrounded grain silo, while the farmers stood by, fear and rage in their eyes, children held up above their heads so that they might early learn the injustice of a farming existence. They had armed and fortified, but not well

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enough. Arnold had led a clever attack at a weak point of their defenses, scaling a river bluff to hit them in the rear, the sort of operation that, under other circumstances, in other times, would have won him a medal.

She and Arnold had fought about that, about the meaning of being armored modern-day Mongols looting without mercy, and about her refusal to bear another, late, child for him via one of her own reimplanted gene-scrubbed ova. It had been a constant, sweating struggle, which Arnold had regarded as healthy mental exercise.

He'd been a big, solid man, immovable when standing still, irresistible when moving. He'd been killed in Wisconsin, near the touristic ruins of the Dells. Killed by Jugur soldiers of the Stoop, she was told. Maybe. She half-suspected that the bullet lodged in that wide chest had come from an angry human farmer's gun. His role in her life had been bigger than Steve's could ever be, but still he stood back there in her memory, a solid part of the landscape, and never troubled her sleep.

Unlike her first husband, Daniel. He came back only late at night, in isolated incidents, desperately forgotten otherwise, always standing over the still and dead figure of their daughter Selene, which made no sense, he'd never seen Selene dead, never ever talked to Karinth again after that day. Otherwise, she never thought about him. Not consciously. An alarm shivered the air, indicating an intruder on the street. A particularly clumsy one, it seemed: she could detect no confusion gear in operation, and you could have heard the footsteps without sonic sensors.

Images of the surrounding streets clicked on. The snow was tinged pink with the approaching evening. And there, just turning the corner, a single human figure, strolling along exactly as if there was no war, no frozen city, no battery of defensive weapons focused harshly on his location.

Steve Hardt pulled back his hood and waved, blowing steam out of his pursed lips like cigarette smoke.

She blinked, and the screens went out of focus. Damn it. She rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. Steve strolled down to her front steps and paused, looking for a moment at the sunset at the end of her street.

"Steve!" She scrambled to her feet. He couldn't hear her, not through meters of shielding and concrete. And he was going right up to that useless front door, to search vainly for the long-gone brass door knocker. "I'm coming, Steve, damn you."

She climbed out through a tunnel parallel to the old sewer pipe, undogged a hatch, and emerged at the opposite end of the street. He still stood on the porch, looking at the house. It looked just as it had the day he left. Pure white, newly painted . . . the front had been blown up once,

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and when she'd replaced the door she hadn't been able to find a lion-headed brass door knocker.

"Over here," she said. Her voice cracked over the silent street.

He turned and stared at her for a long moment. "Karinth." Then he walked toward her. "How are you?" His voice was pitched conversationally, as if the frozen street was just a length of clean white linen on a restaurant table.

He hadn't changed: thinning sandy hair, pale blue eyes, big ears, long chin. He looked impossibly young, as if he was her own child.

"Oh, damn you, Steve," she said through tears. "Damn you. You promised you wouldn't try to come back."

"I lied," he said.

She had to have moved things out of place before he came, so she would have something to do. She couldn't possibly have had to go through this much work every time she made a pot of tea.

Steve watched the powerful, gray-brush-haired woman bustle around the kitchen. She had trouble looking at him, and snuck glances out of the corners of her eyes. He pretended not to notice. He affected interest in a design of tiles on the wall.

"Why are you looking at me?" she said, standing with her back to him.

"Because I haven't seen you in so long," he said.

"And what do you see?" She was challenging.

He shrugged. "What should I see? I see Karinth Tolback."

"The name's Karinth Carlson," she said harshly. "That was Arnold's last name. Arnold was my second husband. He died eight years ago. I kept it. It's about all I have of him."

"Okay. Carlson. But I see *you*, Karinth. You want me to say you haven't changed a bit? I won't."

She managed a laugh, and shook her head, looking down at the tea pot. "*You* haven't changed much. Not at all."

Her shoulders were wide, her back strong. She'd lost a lot of her womanly shape, and looked aggressively competent, as if she had concentrated on that personality feature in preference to the others. She wore a utilitarian coverall. Her face was creased and lined. She put the tea on a tray and carried it into the living room. He followed, then stood there and looked at her as she sat on the couch.

He'd been whirled through the infinite spaces and was dizzy, standing on the same rug he'd started on, as if the world had just tilted for an instant and come back completely changed.

"I was the only human being on Jugurtha," he said. "They watched me. Every minute of every day, they watched me. I represented the entire race to them. . . . Adalti knew I would."

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"That was your job," she said distantly. "You knew what you were going up against. You knew. . . ."

"We both knew. Karinth. Kari, love, I came back a long way to find you."

Tears suddenly flowed down her gullied cheeks. Her eyes were still dark brown, but looked completely different. Not just because her face was different, fallen down on the bones, but because she'd had her lenses and corneas replaced as they aged. The new, more efficient focusing arrangement worked like a bellows camera, and her eyes bulged out at him as he moved closer, efficiently, if disquietingly, changing the focal length.

"I haven't cried since . . . I didn't cry when Arnold died. . . . I didn't even cry when Daniel left. . . . I don't remember. . . . I don't know . . . "

He didn't put his arms around her. She didn't want that, not yet. Just crying in front of him was enough of a sign to him. She'd never liked to do that.

"I remember. The last time I cried was when Selene died. She was my daughter. My only child. If she'd lived she would only be a few years younger than you."

Steve didn't say anything. He just provided her with a calm silence.

"It was stupid. *My* stupidity, not hers, not anyone else's. Not Adalti's, though later I tried to think so. Mine. She was helping me. She was only fifteen . . . I remember myself at fifteen, nothing like her . . . fifteen is old now. You've lived a long time at that age. But she hadn't lived at all. And now she won't. We . . . I was helping Adalti. He had evidence that a local Stoop commander had ordered a massacre of human prisoners in the Indiana dunes, near the ruins of a Gary steel mill. He wanted to cover it. Find the bodies. Display the Stoop to Jugurtha in a way the Stoop didn't want to be seen."

"How had he found that out?"

She didn't hesitate. "From me. I got it from Great Lakes intelligence. They didn't know what to do with it: propaganda? How are you going to make people fight any harder? Atrocity news is low value, less important than an accurate weather report. We're fighting for survival. But on Jugurtha it's a different matter. So I slid it to Adalti."

Adalti had been with those refugees in Anatolia, managing and recording the first contact between Jugur and human beings. It was only gradually, over long thought and investigation, that Steve had realized that the crashlanded Jugur were not refugees from some galactic conflict. That was just a cover story. They were all eyemouths, a boatload of media Jugur, making contacts and getting used to the place. An odd way to make interspecies contact, Steve had thought, until the Stoop-directed comet hit and he realized they were here to cover the big story: the

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invasion of Earth by the Stoop. Slowly, as the humans had talked to the Jugur, Adalti had co-opted Steve and Karinth, and they had been stringers of his ever since. Some called that treason.

"And it was a trap," Steve said.

She sighed. "The Stoop had gotten wind of it. How did you know?"

Steve remembered the flurry it had caused on Jugurtha. In juxtaposition, it had made his image stronger. "It was on the news." A lot of nice visuals: exploding steel-mill buildings, vehicles plowing through collapsing walls, flames so hot that metal melted. It had been intercut with some ancient human newsreel footage of a steel mill, with pouring molten steel and huge glowing cauldrons, an indication of Adalti's fine hand. Steve had watched the images over and over, catching glimpses of Karinth's silhouette and her distinctive way of moving. The reports had not mentioned a daughter.

"Of course it was on the news. That was the whole point, wasn't it? The Stoop hit us there, a hard attack, they usually couldn't spare that much ordnance. Three of Adalti's eyemouths were killed. My daughter drove an APC right into a Stoop assault squad . . . the rest of us managed to escape. My husband Daniel blamed me, divorced me . . . I never saw him again. He was right to do it."

Daniel had no doubt known what Steve knew now. Karinth had risked herself and her daughter in a high-stakes gamble to further influence Jugur public opinion via the eyemouths. Actual military operations against the Stoop were of only secondary importance. The flaming images had been common currency on Jugur for weeks, the first significant sign of notice of that war on a distant planet.

She'd been responsible for the way it came out. She'd known the Stoop would catch wind of the eyemouth expedition to dig up their dirt. Perhaps she had even made sure they caught wind of it, taking the risk she would be killed when the attack came. Selene had died instead.

Then, months later, Adalti had come back again, to dig up the bodies from the forgotten massacre and the bodies from the recent battle, and to display them side by side, burnt and shattered human skulls next to lumps of long-forgotten slag. Had Karinth looked there for her daughter's remains? Had her husband?

"She was your daughter," Steve said. "No doubt about that."

"Yes, she was."

The silence stretched. He had run through the snow to try to throw his arms around an anonymous armed woman on a snowmobile. But he had barely touched Karinth. Their hug had been perfunctory. All the way back from Jugurtha, he had thought about little else but whether he would see her again. It had seemed to him that she had shared that trip home with him, but now, looking at her, he knew that her life had

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been something completely different. It was an icy, incomprehensible world, full of children that looked like seals, doctors that represented war-fighting corporations, lovers that turned in an eye-blink from equals to grim figures of authority whose histories made mock of your experience.

"Please, Karinth," he whispered. "Don't be angry at me for coming back. I need you."

"It's all right."

When Steve Hardt had left the Earth, he and Karinth had released each other from every oath and every promise. It didn't make sense, they told each other. Light speed will pull on every cord until it is broken. Better to cut voluntarily than feel each one ripped from the flesh and soul. He had made a little ceremony of it, as he liked to do, a parting of string in a candle flame. He remembered it, a tug and then two loose pieces, one in each of their hands, connected to nothing. String after string, then a lot of alcohol, and then soon it was dawn and he had to go. He'd even thrown up, for the first time since college. So she had married, twice, and had a child. It was only natural that she should have, though he could not restrain a flash of equally natural jealousy. Those men had lived the life with her that he should have.

He looked at her as she sat huddled on the couch, and thought: *I hid one of those strings in my pocket.* Saved it from the flame. He still had it, he'd taken it to Jugurtha and back and held it in his hand as he reentered the Earth's atmosphere.

He knew she still had one too.

A trumpeting sound. Steve turned slowly and she watched him, waiting for his reaction.

"My God!"

For the first time in three days, since he had shown up on her doorstep, she laughed. The midget mastodon trotted out of the trees of Grant Park and extended its snout to Steve, hoping for some food. He jumped back and it looked hurt, not used to anything but full approval. It was six feet at the shoulder and covered with long reddish hair.

"We modified some ova from elephants at the Brookfield Zoo," she said. "Implanted genes from desiccated Wrangel Island dwarf mastodons."

"What . . . why?"

She shrugged. "What could we do? The elephants are dead now, all the tropical animals. We let the musk oxen, the bactrian camels, that stuff go. They live out there in the open lands somewhere, I think. I hope. I look for them when I'm out there. But we adapted the elephants as we adapted ourselves."

He looked up at the tall, silent city around them. The city park opened

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out on the cracked and fissured ice of the lake, huge chunks thrust up, blue in the morning light. He was slender in his bulky, unflattering coat, and his brown hair was crisply brushed. He moved with a bouncing grace.

He turned quickly to her, as if hoping to catch her off guard. "Have you adapted to the Jugur?" he asked.

"You don't know the first thing about it," she said angrily. "We've been at war so long I've almost forgotten anything else. But we won't stop. Not for anything."

"Good, good." Suddenly he seemed distracted. Her anger didn't affect him. "Now, this meeting with the Great Lakes board . . . it still sounds weird to me, you know? That an army has a board of directors, stock holders. But what do I know? What will they think of me?"

"It's what they will make of you that's important," Karinth said. "A hero."

"The Stoop won't negotiate with anyone else."

"That's right. So if they're going to listen to a message from the Jugurjur, it will have to come from someone who's proved that he can fight them on their own terms."

"Right, right." He gazed off distractedly.

So that was why he was nervous. He wasn't afraid of meeting the Board of Directors of the Great Lakes Consortium. He was afraid of what they would have to do to make him a hero worthy of negotiating with the Stoop. Even a fake hero gets put in danger.

Adalti had once explained it to her. Most Jugur saw themselves in the Stoop. The Stoop represented the basic virtues of the Jugur as a species. They were blithe, interested in dramatic virtue, completely unconcerned with other sentient species save as dramatic backdrops to their own actions. Clan allegiance had always been much stronger among Jugur than territoriality, and the Stoop represented an overarching, almost philosophically defined clan. Most Jugur and Jugurtha had evolved mentally beyond the simple allegiances represented by the Stoop, but they still valued them, particularly as the Stoop was played to them by the eyemouths.

The Stoop had its own vision of itself, also played to it by the eyemouths. They valued heroism and constant war. Steve had to appear as a representative of those values before they would consent to hear him speak, no matter how important his message.

"Don't worry," she said. "Adalti will handle it."

"Adalti. You've known him for thirty years now. Do you understand him yet?"

"He's a genius, Steve. How can I understand him?"

Adalti was a brilliant eyemouth: a Michelangelo, a Rembrandt of the

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form. He was abnormal, like all geniuses. He was genuinely interested in alien races, human beings in particular. His version of the Stoop's invasion of the Earth was his great masterwork. Other eyemouths did his bidding, sometimes not realizing it. The eyemouths who had made Steve Hardt famous on Jugurtha had been in the position of medieval stonecutters assisting in the making of a cathedral whose final structure they had no way of imagining.

Karinth thought of the immense arc of Steve's journey to Jugurtha and back, the passing close to the speed of light and the quick transition beyond it that sucked up most of the distance. Holding it together was the taut line of his life, with her own high parabola superimposed on it, intersecting at two points. The whole thing made some sort of sense to Adalti that it didn't yet to her.

Steve Hardt was a child, she told herself, a callow young man who'd spent a good portion of his life cramped in a tuna can stuck to the side of a Stoop warship. Who was he to her? Did she really remember loving him? She wasn't sure.

Still, there was something in him that spoke to her, even after the distance of time that had stretched between them. She liked the way he moved, the way he held things in his hands. She liked the way he listened when she had something to say. She liked the way he looked at her, really *looked* at her, as if it didn't matter that she was thirty years older than he'd seen her last. She could feel that liking within her and she didn't like it. The time for that was long past. The sooner Steve Hardt made his arrangements with Great Lakes and went off on his mission, the better.

"Come on, Steve," she said. "They're waiting."

"Okay." He took her arm and they walked together down the path. "I'll tell you how it goes."

She couldn't think of any polite way of getting him to let go of her arm, so she let him hold it. It felt all right. She thought she could put up with it.

"They have the military plans all ready," Steve said, shaking his head. "They know what to do."

It had been a rough meeting, and Steve had left soaked in sweat. But they had finally agreed. The Great Lakes Consortium would make Steve Hardt a hero. They had been resentful, and there had been opposition, but, finally, there had been no choice.

"Of course they do," Karinth said. "They've been at this a long time."

Her voice was sharp, irritated. Without thinking about it, he sat down on the couch next to her. She jerked as he sank down into the cushions.

"Karinth," he said. "Why—?"

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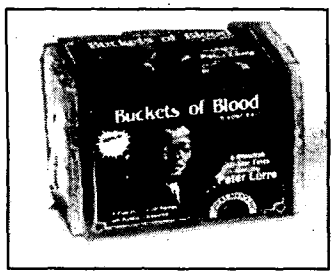

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"Do we really need to talk about it? Do we need the whole analysis?"

"No, we don't. I love you, Karinth."

"No, you *don't*. You sat there in your little capsule and thought about me and thought about me and now that you *see* me you're still *thinking* about me. We're not who we were, Steve."

"No." He pursed his lips, amused. "We never were, though."

"Oh!"

She was right, and she was wrong. She wasn't the tender young woman he'd loved, but she wasn't someone else either, regardless of how many husbands or children she'd had. He was going out into Wisconsin in a few days, to let the Stoop launch an attack on him so that he could appear to be a hero, and have the honor of negotiating with them.

He was never going to negotiate with them. The Jugurjur had nothing worthwhile to offer, and the Stoop would not listen. He wondered if Karinth understood his real plan. She'd talked with Adalti for thirty years. She had to.

He slid down the couch toward her like a teenager attempting his first seduction. His body was a heavy sack full of reality. If he truly loved her, after all these years, after all that had happened, he should feel the urge to make love to her. A woman, no matter what age, had a right to that from the man who loved her. And he knew she felt the absence of that urge in him. There was a look in the eye, a tingly warmth to the tips of the fingers, a tautness in the skin, that should have been there and it was all missing, as if it had been pounded out somewhere between the stars. Even if she rejected him and pushed him away, she should be able to feel that heat coming from him again. He wanted to do that for her.

He put his arms around Karinth's waist and she finally let her weight relax against him.

"Touch my lips," he said. "With your fingertips."

She hesitated a moment, then did as he asked. With his eyes closed, the years fell away. They lay in their tent, tired from the day, their minds buzzing with insane new information, and, and she rolled over and stroked him slowly, as light as a butterfly's wing, shooting energy over his skin.

He felt the shift, the flow inside. Dr. Saleh had conditioned and trained him. It *felt* real, by God. And the fact that it came right when he needed it didn't mean that it wasn't real, not at all.

He kissed Karinth. Her lips were ridged, rougher than they had been, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He felt the fire inside as he hadn't felt it in years. As he hadn't felt it since he left her.

"Please," Karinth said. "The lights."

He jumped and turned them off. It was best that way. He stood there

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for a moment, hearing her breathe in the darkness, then returned and felt her fumbling hands slide their way down his sides.

"Okay, Steve," Karinth whispered into the radio. "The Stoop unit's just over the ridge." She looked up at the crumbling ceiling of the suburban house she sat in, imagining him out in the snow, lying still, waiting for the first signs of sunlight.

"I see deer tracks," Steve said.

"How fresh?" She leaned forward. One of the many screens was vertically striped by tree trunks.

"Don't know. I'm lucky I know they're deer." A pause. "Do deer live in Wisconsin? Maybe it's from a dog."

She laughed, hard. It hurt. "Oh, Steve. Don't get killed. We need a live hero."

"Sure. Tell Adalti I'll do my best."

Karinth turned to Adalti, who squatted next to the rotted couch. One of his eyes stared blankly, its nerves recruited to process direct electronic image information from his cameras. Jugur seldom massed more than fifty kilos, and Adalti was on the small side. He suddenly seemed tiny to her, with his fine arms and legs, his sharply pointed face, and the fuzzy membranes that were all that was left of ancestral glide wings, stretching from his elbow joints down to his wide, articulated hips. Jugur were like highly evolved flying squirrels, not at all the sort of being to be fighting heavy, solid human beings on more than equal terms.

"Some of the angles are difficult," Adalti said in his whispering voice. "The main attack will be coming out of the rising sun. I will have to process the image."

"You always process the image, Adalti."

"Still, each must have the taste of reality. Otherwise the mind spits it out. And the young trees on that side . . . they fragment the view."

"Part of the idea. Makes the attack safer."

Adalti extended his wing membranes in irritation. "Winning the battle is not the point, Karinth. A few more casualties—reasonable cost for a good shot. You know this. What are you after?"

The destruction of your entire species, Karinth thought. Instead, she smiled. Adalti knew that she hated him because he was a Jugur, despite all he had done. It didn't seem to bother him. If anything, it made her more interesting.

"Steve Hardt has to survive. Without that, all the good shots in the world don't mean anything."

"He will survive," Adalti said. "He will survive forever. Up there." He pointed to the line of screens. "His story will be watched on Jugurtha centuries from now. Your story."

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She barely listened to his grandiose pronouncements. She was remembering the previous night, when Steve made love to her. She'd seen the heat flare up in his eyes. And suddenly . . . she'd loved both her husbands, and other men as well. She'd made love in calm safe times and in the face of imminent death. She'd borne a child, and seen her die. But still, the night before Steve left the Earth and the night just past formed the lips of a cup that held the last thirty years in it. If he had not come back, none of it would have made any sense. It would simply have happened.

"We're going up, hon." She could hear the quaver of fear in his voice. Charging up a snow-covered hill at a Jugur military unit had not been in his job description. "Talk to you later."

The end of his voice and the start of distant gunfire came at once. What was left of the house's window glass shook and rattled. The Jugur unit had been entrenched in what had once been this small Wisconsin town's riverfront park, which covered the steep slope down to the river.

The line of screens dangling from the edge of the ceiling flared with combat. Supersonic bouncing-betty shrapnel shredded the bases of the second-growth trees and they toppled in all directions, forming an impassible tangle. Three dull thunks and the thick-frozen river cracked open. Armored vehicles pushed through the ice from their concealment on the river bed and opened fire.

" . . . keep two meters below the ridge line, Parker . . . that's a reactive glacis . . . hit the rock next to it, change the angle . . . good, Sugura . . . " Steve's voice cracked through the speakers, giving calm commands. It wasn't his voice, of course, just a simulation of it coming from a tactical computer, but Karinth found herself listening to it anyway, hoping to hear what he was feeling.

It had taken a while to find a Stoop unit that had strayed far enough out of the defensive line through central Wisconsin. There had been little action in this sector in recent months, and the Stoop had gotten a little lax. An overwhelming force had been mounted against them. It made no military sense: this unit would be destroyed, but then the humans would be exposed to a much larger Stoop counter-attack. By then, they hoped, the emotional effect of this encounter would be felt, making the inevitable later military defeat irrelevant.

Adalti wove the various image strands into a narrative. Karinth caught hints of it as she watched. The Stoop weaponry had mostly been destroyed, leaving only the appearance of function. That remotely piloted weapon, for example, cranked fast on its treads, but by now its gun was useless.

He looked good, Karinth thought, her fingers shaking. Steve dodged and weaved over the toppled trunks, dropping, then emerging again. He was a little unsteady on his feet, but the slips were edited out almost as

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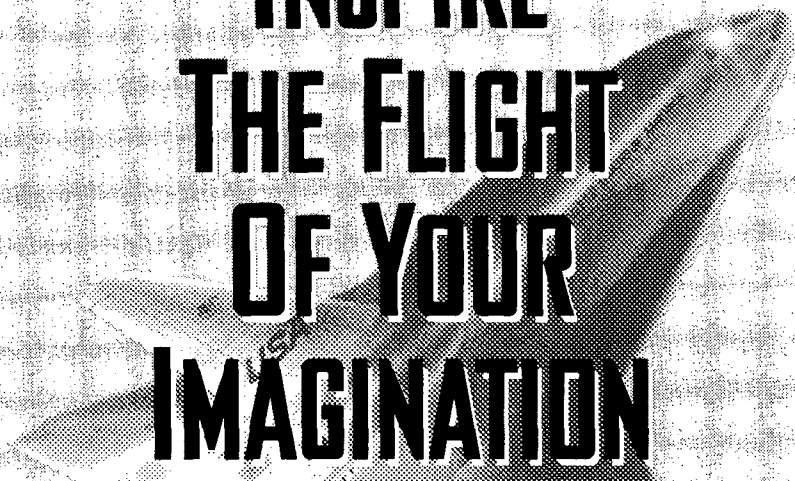

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they occurred. He rolled through flaming brush and down into a ravine on the other side.

The sun was full up now, and the boiling smoke looked heavy in its light. Flying remotes circled the battle. She'd been through fights like that herself, but now she found it hard to breathe. She had nothing to do but sit and watch and feel afraid.

"Damn, *damn*." Steve's real live voice crackled in her ears. It was punctuated by the blast of shell fire. "Take you *down*." A screen showed the RPW she had seen before, now firing, not out of commission in the slightest. Its turret whirled, tracking.

She could see the other channels, as soldiers reacted to the possible loss of their imagistic hero. These would not be seen in Adalti's version. "Get in there! We're going to lose him! The stupid son of a bitch. . . . "

"Steve!" Karinth called.

There was nothing but the sound of his ragged breath. Then: "come here, baby. Come to momma."

The RPW ground forward. Its armor gleamed like that of a knight in a young girl's fantasy. Had bored Stoop soldiers spent their time polishing it, or had Adalti removed the grime through some digital filter? A blast, and the earth and logs beneath its treads gave way.

Steve screamed.

Karinth ran through the blown-out front door of the house into the street. Smoke rose up through the trees and she could see the silver specks of helicopters and flying cameras.

"It's not out there," Adalti said lazily. "It's in here."

Karinth stood in the cold sun, breathing as slowly and silently as she could. Time had gritted her joints. Her inner thighs still hurt from Steve's desperate lovemaking. She held herself, remembering his arms.

"Interesting," Adalti said. "Come and see, Karinth."

She stood in the doorway. Steve was pinned beneath a fall of logs. Helmeted soldiers sawed and pried desperately. The bent ruin of the RPW lay tilted nearby, its weight keeping the logs pressed down on Steve.

"He led it off the solid ground, then blew up a log supporting it." Adalti monitored peripheral areas of the battle. Most of the Stoop were now dead. "It dropped."

"Alive?" She held her breath. Steve's face was pale on the screen.

"Alive." Adalti sounded amused. "The soldiers are annoyed. We don't need a real dead hero."

"Just a synthetic live one. I know. I hope they'll forgive him."

"It doesn't matter. We have what we need. And now they need to move quickly."

Battle would cover this entire sector by nightfall, as the Stoop reacted

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to the attack. Steve, Karinth, and Adalti would be long gone by then, of course, but the soldiers would stay.

And all she could think about was last night. Every move, every breath. Where had it come from, that passion she had seen suddenly arise in his gaze? He had gotten it from somewhere, she was suddenly sure. Created it. She blinked in the cold wind. If only she could be young and desirable for just one day, and they could make love in the warm sunlight on top of a flat rock, far above everything else, and tell the world to go to hell.

She stepped back in the house. Steve's noble face stared out at her from the screens. He commanded the attack and bravely led it up the steep slope into the teeth of the Stoop guns. It was the modern Jugur equivalent of an epic poem, a visual *Iliad,* the story of a hero. A smart species, the Jugur had adapted to their changing technologies, but used them to support their own image of themselves, the image that said they would negotiate equally only with a hero.

Somewhere under that glossy surface was a genuinely brave man, she knew. Defeat after defeat, and still he had dragged himself back to Earth for the final effort. He was convinced it would finally kill him. And it *would* kill him. It had to. There was no other sensible end to it all.

Did that mean that there was someone who loved her, somewhere underneath the nerve manipulation that had made him her lover the previous night? Perhaps that image concealed a reality too, and human beings used technology to support their image of themselves as well.

She sat and watched Adalti manipulate Steve's flaring figure on the screens, for transmission to the Stoop and Jugurtha itself, and felt hollower than the loss of either husband had left her.

The records and images would show that Steve had planned it this way from the beginning. He had no doubt of that. It had a satisfying narrative symmetry and would be accepted. That it was really the last desperate act after a string of failures would be ignored.

He stepped out between two lines of upraised batons held in the hands of Stoop commanders. Steve did not look at their expressionless long-nosed faces, their tiny sunk-back mouths gritted in concentration, saving his attention for the rough broken pavement on which he painfully walked. His shattered hip was barely healed, and was held together by fine metal wires.

A fire glowed in the lake beyond the sand-drowned concrete ruins of Gary, lighting the underside of the clouds. The Stoop had lit an ion-tinted fusion flame somewhere out there, visible from Wisconsin to Michigan. Important acts were always consummated at the crossing of the terminator, they told him, and the flame gave the all-night negotiations the look

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of perpetual sunset. A pointless gesture, Adalti thought—adding sunset light to the images sent to Jugurtha was a simple procedure—but the Stoop now affected to be traditionalists, though not so traditional that they would actually wait for the sun.

It was almost dawn, the real terminator now approaching. A beam of flickering red light picked Steve out, cast by a parabolic mirror on top of a crumbling old brick chimney. He blinked in the sudden molten light. Humans now stood to either side, trying to look dignified, respectful, exactly as if they weren't confronting the creation of a lunatic alien PR wizard, exactly as if he was actually a hero.

Steve had gone all the way to Jugurtha to persuade the Jugurjur to pull the Stoop back from Earth. It had taken him three years to realize that the Jugurjur, a ceremonial social club a thousand years old, had no intention of doing anything practical, like interdicting Stoop military supplies. While on Jugurtha, however, Steve had become a media star of the sort that ruled the minds and souls of the Jugur. A human, come all the way to Jugurtha to talk and convince! He was a wonder. The war on Earth was just the background from which he came. That fame was Adalti's first step.

And now, after becoming a hero in the eyes of the Stoop, who were still compelled by the images of his fight in Wisconsin, he had attempted to negotiate with them, and failed again. This was now their planet too, they said, and they were here to stay. Those of their number who wished to leave and go on to fight on a more pleasant planet were not heard. The weak message from the Jugurjur impressed no one. He had hoped to break their internal cohesion by a further demonstration of human resolve, and had failed again. And that heroism was Adalti's second step, for those same images had gone to Jugurtha.

"Karinth." Adalti had set up a ceremonial space for Steve in what had once been the bottom level of a parking garage. Stumps of supporting beams thrust up armatures of rusted metal. He gasped. His wounded hip sockets were filled with sand. The pain had a sweet feel that brought a flush to his skin. The wide concrete floor around him was rorschached with ancient oil stains.

"Karinth!" What did she think, being here in the place where there was no monument to her dead daughter? The Stoop had insisted on holding the meeting here. Steve suspected some sort of cruel arrogance. They knew of Karinth's importance to him. Was this any way to treat a hero?

She appeared around a crumbled wall and regarded him solemnly. Her long shadow slid out before her, its flickering edges mixing with the detritus on the ground. They had not made love since that one night. She didn't want it. He worked to suppress his now-useless lust.

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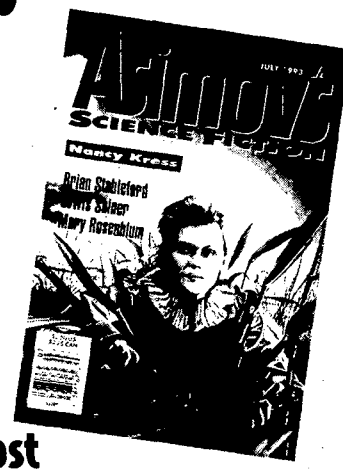

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"Yes, Steve. What is it?" She was like a wife responding to a husband's nervous, slightly cranky entreaty.

He stumbled toward her and put his arms around her. He didn't know what he would do without her. Perhaps he was now unconsciously addicted to Saleh's modifications to his hippocampus, his cingulate gyrus. It didn't matter. He kissed her slowly, then rested his head on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said. "I did the best I could."

She stroked his hair. "I know. But you're such a goddam *man,* Steve."

"What do you mean?"

"You thought I needed the hard rod to let me know you loved me."

He turned away, deeply embarrassed. "How did you—"

"Oh, come *on.* I've lived in this world for a long time. Don't you think I can recognize what's in it? That stuff was developed for cases of real trauma . . . though I suppose this is real trauma. The life we live is traumatic."

"Well," he said. "Did it let you know I loved you or not?"

She managed a smile. "I suppose it did at that. Oh, Steve. There really wasn't anything we could do, was there?"

"No, there wasn't." He felt her shoulder bones under his hands. One of them felt odd—artificial, she'd said. The body was everything, the body was nothing . . . she wore perfume, the scent she'd worn years before. She must have found a bottle of it somewhere in the back of a closet. Amazing that it hadn't evaporated.

"And now, my dear," he said, feeling a light-headed terror. "Now you must kill me."

She jerked away. "What?"

"Sorry." He didn't let her go. "Didn't mean to be flip. Or rather . . . well, what other reaction am I supposed to have? Here, look." He took her beyond the wall and pointed toward the east. The Stoop forces were emplaced there, stretching out to the Michigan border. "I have done nothing. I have succeeded in nothing."

"Steve! That's not—"

"Isn't it? I've had a great adventure. I've gone to a distant world and back. I've lost an entire life with a woman I love. And I have failed completely at what I wanted to do. The Jugurjur wants to cut off Stoop supplies and the Stoop thinks of giving up the Earth as a bad job and moving on, but neither of them does anything because no one's given them a *reason* to. My attempts at negotiating a solution failed. The war will continue. That is, assuming that my purpose was diplomatic in the first place."

He looked at her, but now she wouldn't meet his eyes. She looked out instead over the drifted sand dunes that had obliterated the streets of Gary. "I don't remember anymore where Selene died, exactly. The sand

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covers it all up, and all those old buildings are gone. But you saw us on the news, didn't you."

"I did. And they'll see me. Talk to Adalti. He knows. What will—"

"Oh, some damn thing," she said harshly. "Easy enough to make this entire negotiation look like an ambush, an attempt to destroy the Stoop in one blow. Adalti can show it that way, if he wants. We'll help. The Stoop will react quickly." What he had told her was not really a surprise to her. She'd known it all along. Karinth had always been a little ahead of him.

"I wanted to succeed," he said plaintively. "I didn't want it to come to this. Know that, Karinth."

"I know." She sighed. "But that's not good art, and Adalti is an artist. I'm sorry you never got to meet Selene. I think you would have liked her." A kiss, and she was gone, the woman who had risked herself and lost her daughter in a ploy to get good war coverage from the eyemouths. Steve looked after her and wished she had tried to talk him out of it.

The sun rose and the snow-covered dunes gleamed around him. The Stoop would blame him. He didn't know how Adalti would play it, how he would convince the Stoop that this entire negotiation was simply a ploy to get them here in one place so that they could be destroyed, but he knew Adalti would do it. And the Stoop would know that it was all Steve Hardt's doing. He sat down in a chair, favoring his injured hip, and waited.

The Stoop attack on the negotiation ground started just before noon.

"The Consortium will kill me," Karinth Tolback, smoke-blackened, bleeding from a fresh wound in her thigh, said to the eyemouth Adalti. "They think I planned it all."

The dull sound of some vast, distant explosion drifted over them and wandered out into the lake. One of Adalti's ever-present screens showed images of metal bending, brick and concrete shattering. It was impossible to tell where it was, what was happening, who was dying. Without context, an explosion is entirely anonymous.

"Aren't they too busy fighting the Stoop?" Adalti could barely give her any attention. War had spread across the center of the continent in the wake of the Stoop attack on Gary, from Alberta down into the Appalachians. Each screen showed another bright fragment of the blazing, bloody war. And Adalti, the master craftsman, laid each one down in its proper place in the mosaic. It would make sense. When someone could finally sit down and watch it, it would make sense. Quite unlike now.

Karinth leaned against the broken-off trunk of a tree. The wave of dizziness passed. "They can spare a little thought for me. I've succeeded in destroying the central organization of the Great Lakes Consortium.

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Getting me won't help the military situation, but it will make them feel better. That's as much as they can do now."

"He died bravely," Adalti said. "He really did."

"No," Karinth said. "I don't want—"

Steve's face blossomed on the screens. He stood amid the ruins of the parking structure, looking up at the sky, waiting. The attack was coming from the sky. There wasn't anything he could do. He couldn't slap the bombs out of the air with the back of his hand. So he stood there, stern, a little sad, and waited.

Karinth couldn't turn her eyes away. The end, when it came, was just one single bright flash of light. When the smoke cleared, and the eyes recovered, there was nothing to be seen. She supposed someone digging through the rubble could have found molars, chunks of flesh, fingers.

It was a good job, perfect for both the Jugur home market and the Stoop. Their pet negotiator, their mascot, Steve Hardt, finally asserted his fundamental loyalties. He and countless others had died to create a show for the Jugur to watch while eating dinner. If they stopped chewing for just a moment, it would have served its purpose.

"The Stoop will leave now," Adalti said crisply. "Some already are." A ship rose up from an anonymous field, leaving behind it the abandoned remains of what was clearly a Stoop military camp. "This last war is just the maintenance of pride."

"Pride! It will leave us with nothing but ruins."

"Rejoice, Karinth Tolback. Victory is yours. Steve Hardt was a symbol to the Jugurjur. Now they will act, cutting off the Stoop's lifelines. And he was a symbol to the Stoop. The Stoop itself is humiliated. Those in favor of leaving the Earth will have their way. You have *won*."

"I guess we have."

She looked at the Jugur. He knelt in the sand, gazing at his screens, seeing images in his head. It seemed he would never stop. Not until the last instant of his life. He had been on Earth for over thirty years, creating his great work.

"Please," she heard her voice say. "The lights." A screen showed her and Steve, in the dark, making love. She watched despite herself. He'd thought it would make her happy if he could make love to her, at least once, and he had been right.

Other images flashed. Steve and Karinth running together up a rough trail in Anatolia, laughing and racing ahead of each other. Steve in the middle of a great field on Jugurtha, rows and rows of empty stone seats rising up around him. Karinth kissing Selene one last time before sending her daughter out in her armored carrier. Steve struggling through the snow, pulling a sledge behind him. Karinth catching sight of Steve on the security screen in her apartment.

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That had been Adalti's great work. The saga of the war between human being and Jugur couldn't be shown directly. That was just explosions and dead bodies. He'd decided to do it through Karinth Tolback and Steve Hardt. From the moment he had met them in Anatolia, he had structured everything around them. He'd sent Steve away, aged her, brought him back. He'd made sure Steve died. He'd made sure the Stoop finally removed themselves from the globe they had tried to destroy, and left the Earth in peace. Every work of art must reach closure.

A tear trembled at the end of her nose and she wiped it away. "How much time would it take to watch the whole thing?" she asked. "All the way through."

Adalti folded his gear away. Other eyemouths busily loaded it into a bulbous wide-tired vehicle.

"Twenty-four of your hours," he said. "Many will do it. Millions. I am immortal. So are you."

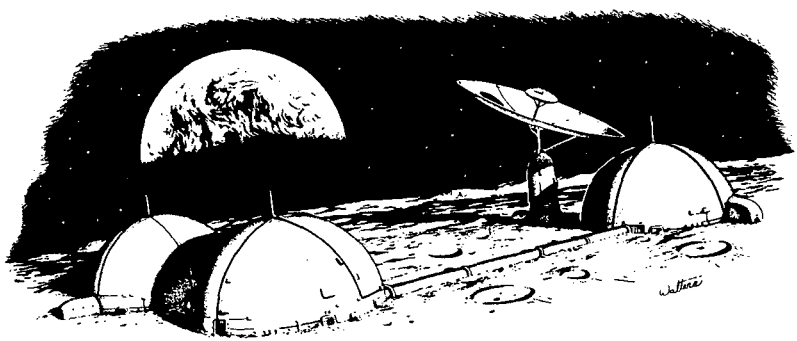
"Adalti!" She almost stepped forward to grab him and break his slender neck.

"Goodbye, Karinth Tolback. We will not speak again." He stepped into the vehicle and it sped away across the sand. In a few seconds, it had disappeared.

She'd never understood him, not even for an instant. He was a genius, and a genius of an alien race. Thirty years in twenty-four hours, all held by the structure of a brilliant work of art. Damn the art, she thought. She'd trade every second of that thirty years for just one afternoon making love on a high rock in the sunlight.

She knelt in the cold sand, turned her face to the sun, and closed her eyes.

She ignored the almost-subliminal whine of the flying camera that caught the final scene. ●



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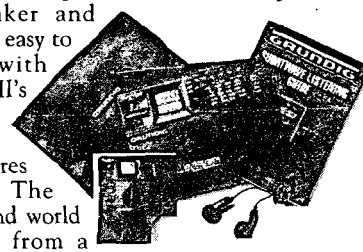

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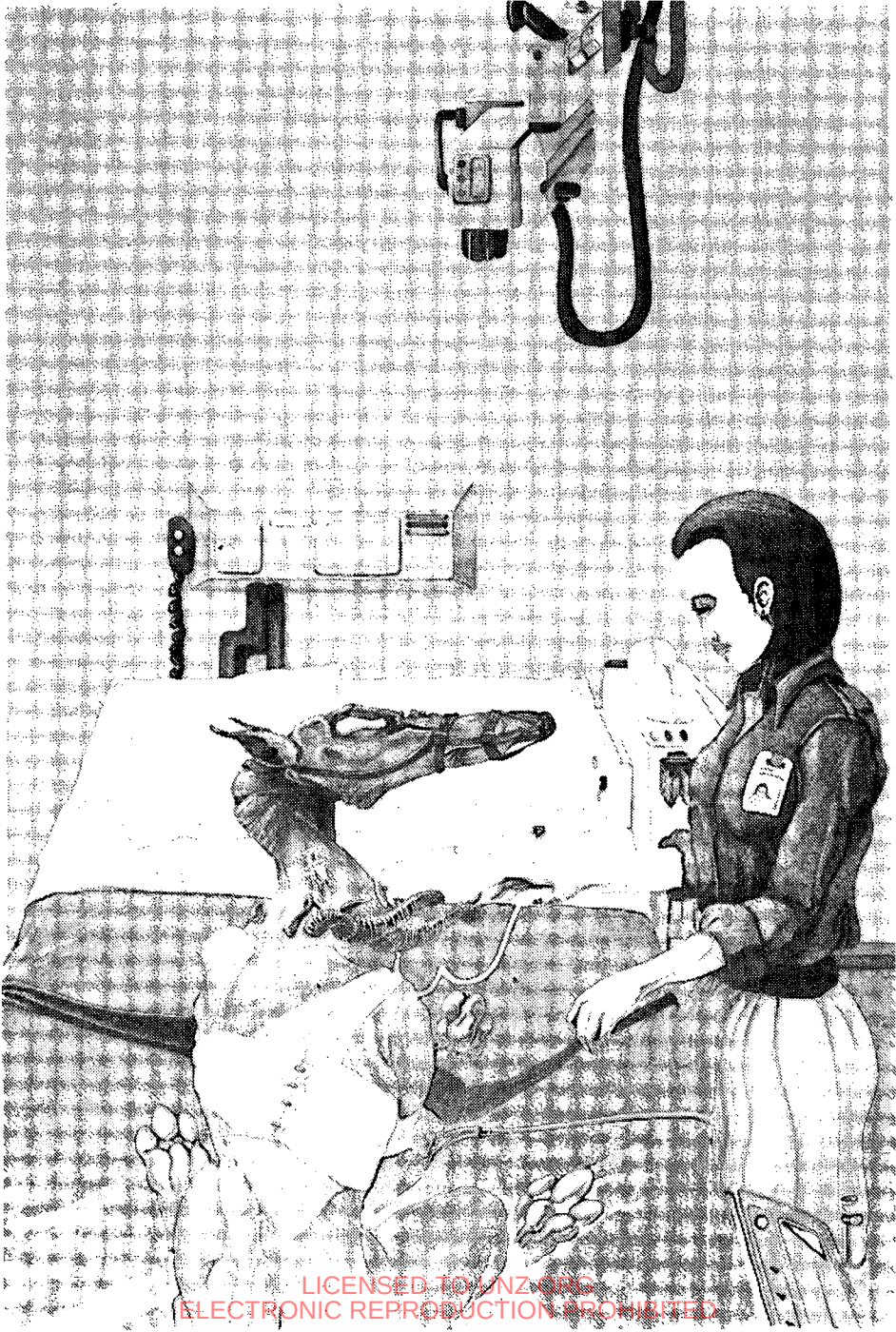

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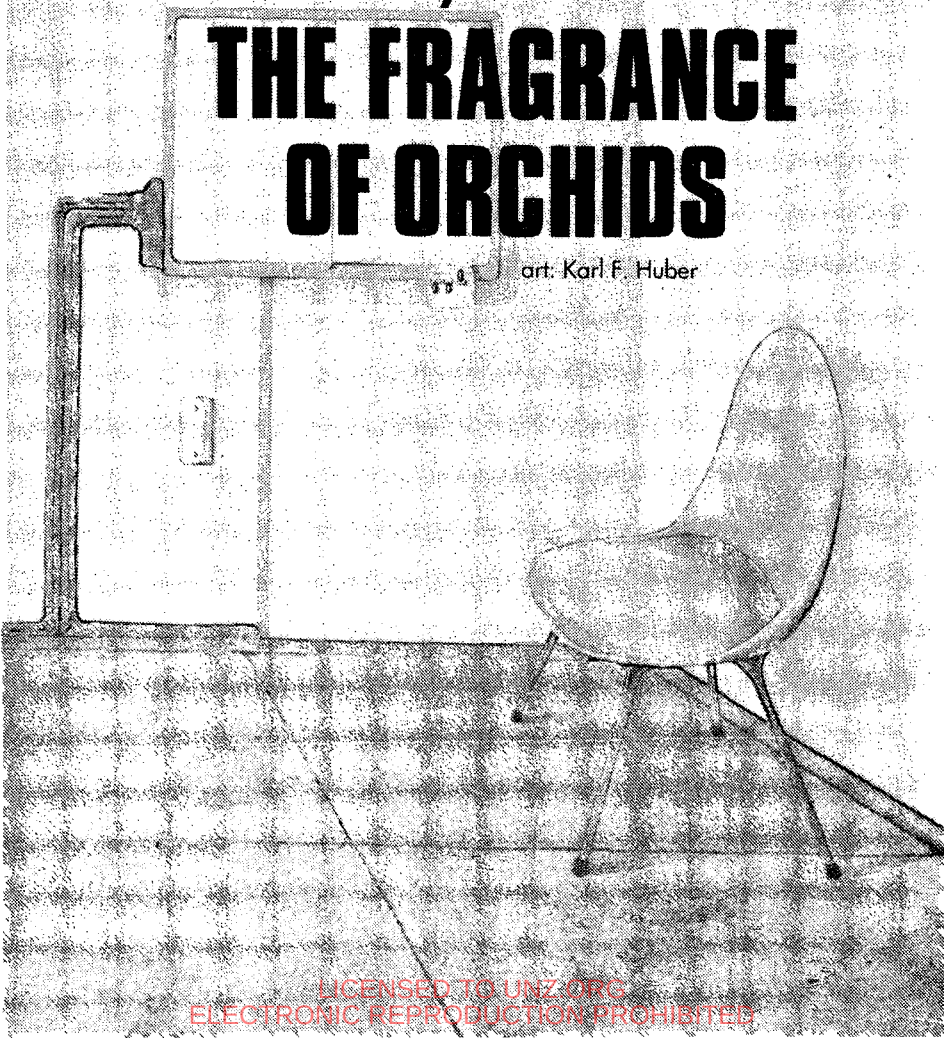
Canadian author Sally McBride was born in Toronto, Ontario, and now lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with her husband, David Sproule. Her credits include SF and fantasy publications in *F&SF*, *On Spec*, *Tesseracts*, and *Matrix*. A story she co-wrote was nominated for a Nebula and she recently finished a novel. Ms. McBride's dark and unsettling story about "The Fragrance of Orchids" marks her first appearance in *Asimov's*.

Sally McBride

THE FRAGRANCE OF ORCHIDS

art: Karl F. Huber



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November, 2023; North Wells, Maine

On Monday morning, a message waited on Sarah Lightburn's answering machine. It was Seule, breathless, forgetting to say when the call was made, or if she intended to call back. Sarah, who up till now had been happy with their progress, felt a sinking in her heart.

"—I know I can handle it. Nothing will happen, we'll be working together, that's all. Clay needs me." Seule's voice was happy, excited. "His project needs me. You've helped me so much, Sarah. I really feel that I have my emotions under control, and if it turns out that I don't . . . well, I'll call you. I think of you as a friend. You know that, don't you? Please be happy for me, Sarah. Everything will be all right."

A pause, and the sound of rapid breathing. Sarah heard Seule's claws clicking impatiently on the receiver, and thumping noises in the background.

"I have to go. The driver is taking my stuff out to the airport limo. Walter's picking me up in Washington."

Walter Farber was head of the psychiatric team assigned to the alien. He'd be happy now, thought Sarah, with his baby back in the nest. She knew that Farber resented anyone other than himself having success with Seule, and she wondered if his attitude stemmed from the past. Or did the past mean anything to a man like Farber?

"Don't worry," said Seule, unsuppressed excitement in her voice. "Thank you for everything—"

A click and she was gone.

Sarah saved the message, automatically hitting the buttons on her old machine. She'd been working with the alien for almost half a year, and they'd made it past the games, past Seule's evasions and the tricks Sarah used to counter them, and were getting to the real stuff. Contrary to her initial misgivings, she'd started to believe that their sessions might be leading somewhere.

Investigations into the similarities and very definite differences between human and animal mentation—the thought patterns forming the mind—had fascinated Sarah when she'd worked with Farber. She'd been a pink-cheeked grad student, eager as a puppy, working mainly with dogs until Farber had been tapped for the alien assignment. He hadn't taken her with him, and funding for projects such as hers had inevitably dried up without the canny grantsmanship he'd practiced. Individual animals she'd grown to understand and respect—with more than the love one gives an intelligent pet—had grown old and died, or had become too withdrawn and dangerous to work with. People hadn't liked the idea of animals who were smarter than their five-year-old children; Sarah of

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necessity turned her interests elsewhere. She'd gone into psychiatry, and had ended up practicing in North Wells, a medium-sized town in Maine.

Sarah spent most of her time working with clients who might most benefit from her blended background in psychiatry and non-human mentation, including a few of the privately owned animals still living with their human mentors. Until Seule, non-human had meant animal or artificial.

Sarah chewed on her lower lip and took a hard copy of Seule's message for her files. Was Seule an animal? Relations between humans and animals were sometimes very good, sometimes bad. When they were bad they were, of course, very often worse than horrid.

She queued the message for transmission to Farber later when the rates went down, and put on the morning pot of coffee.

Two weeks after Seule's breathless farewell, Sarah was on board an old government heli-jet halfway between North Wells and Washington. She was wide awake, angry and scared, and sat hunched in her seat dictating quietly into her journal. "We're flying high to avoid a snowstorm," she said. "This rustbucket is rattling and dipping like a voodoo dancer, so I'll keep this entry brief. This whole business makes me ill. It's so stupid! Can there possibly be a sane reason for what she's done? Damn, if she's going to make it as a human, she's got to learn to bear pain and rejection. Why should she be any different?"

Sarah paused, staring angrily out the tiny, triple-paned window at the indigo horizon. "Of course I don't mean that. Seule *is* different. Her problem is that though she understands it intellectually, she can't really believe it.

"I heard desperation in Farber's voice through the static on his transmission from Washington. What should I expect? He sees his life's work disappearing. And I bet the bastard'll try to blame it on me. Farber's mistake was putting too many emotional and professional eggs into one basket. My mistake? Going after Seule as a client in the first place. I was flattered even to be considered. So who wouldn't be?"

She paused. No, she thought. It was never a mistake, no matter what might happen . . . Sarah clicked off her recorder and scowled at the night.

Spring, 2023; North Wells

Sarah first saw the alien when it came loping up the walk to her office for its initial session. It had an eager, dog-on-a-walk look, like a rump-heavy greyhound wearing a thick pink scarf.

Sarah unashamedly craned her neck out the window of her office, on

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the second floor of an old renovated mansion, the better to catch her first in-the-flesh glimpse of the creature. What had looked like a scarf around Seule's neck fluttered up to become two ragged appendages which grasped the old brass doorknob and turned it. Sarah had admitted to herself that she was nervous. This was no ordinary case. She pulled her head back inside her office.

There would be papers in it for her, perhaps a book. How many had been written already? She dumped her half-finished coffee into her washroom sink, popped a breath freshener in her mouth and ran a hand through her hair. Ready to meet the alien.

During an early session, Sarah made the mistake of handing Seule a Kleenex when they had reached an emotional crisis. It was a purely reflex action, and she felt stupid as soon as she'd done it, as though she'd been suckered somehow. Seule didn't need the tissue, having no nose to run, no tear ducts to leak, and Sarah knew that. But the alien took the token remedy, held it. It became a tradition between them, an occasion for smiles.

As the weeks went by, Sarah found that Seule knew the term "shrink," and enjoyed digging subtle meaning from the word. The alien loved words and was fluent in several languages. She loved the symbols in mathematics, and the archetypes of humanity hidden in music and paintings. Once, on entering the counselor's office, Seule had caught Sarah Lightburn, hands in pockets, squinting at a framed quotation on the wall. It was from the *I Ching,* and said:

> *And when two people understand each other*
> *in their innermost hearts,*
> *Their words are sweet and strong, like*
> *the fragrance of orchids.*

Seule came and stood beside her companionably, reading it too. Sarah suppressed a throb of anger. The quotation seemed insipid, worthless; it had nothing to do with real life. She turned her back to it, smiling brightly at Seule.

As they took their customary seats, Sarah wondered what had happened to her youthful idealism. The message she kept on her wall was vague yet hopeful, mystical yet worded simply and openly; did it have any relevance to her life now? Seule bounded in each day, eager, hopeful, seeming to fill the room with her strangeness and the queer scent of her hide. Reality was observation, deduction, counsel.

Dr. Farber's office called Sarah every week. She dared not ignore his punctilious insistence on having every session downloaded to him, realizing that she could either agree to his terms or blow the chance to work, however briefly, with Seule.

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When her application as a local contact for Seule had been approved, Sarah was frankly surprised. Walter Farber's life had veered so far onto its new trajectory that she'd doubted ever meeting him again.

November, 2023; Washington, DC

Walter and I can't avoid each other now, thought Sarah grimly. I'll be in Washington in another half an hour. The heli-jet hit a bump in the air and her stomach lurched.

In French *seule* means "alone." The astronauts who had found the alien had thought the name appropriate. The pretty creature had been doted on zealously during the long trip back to Earth from Jupiter orbit. The men were reprimanded for teaching the alien child French and English words: *lait,* for the pseudo-milk it learned to lap from a cup; hand, whisker; *bon jour,* good morning. It would have been better, they were told in stern directives from Earth, to have left its brain unsullied by human influences.

Now, eighteen years later, no back page was complete without some tidbit on The Alien.

Like an old-time movie star she passed through life in a shell of her own exclusivity, forever alone in a crowd. After years on earth her strangeness had been diluted into triviality.

But now . . . now, she'd committed an act so outrageous, so desperate, as to vault her back into the headlines with a vengeance.

The heli-jet touched down in Washington just ahead of the snow. Sarah was taken directly to the hospital and allowed to observe Seule for a moment, then, after finding that nothing had yet been organized in the way of briefings or investigations, headed to an all-night restaurant next to the hospital. It wasn't much, but after what she'd seen she didn't feel like eating anyway. A pack of newspeople in search of coffee arrived to put in time before the first press conference. Sarah, amazed at how few people knew what was going on, sourly predicted imminent mobs of pro- and anti-aliens bopping each other with signs. As well, of course, as the ones who had claimed all along she was a hoax.

Alone in a high-backed booth, Sarah pushed her half-eaten plate of fish and chips away.

She whispered into her journal, rubbing her eyes with the back of one wrist. "She's not a hoax. It's all real; her blood and Elliot's, the violent, hopeless thing she did. Seule was unconscious when I got a glimpse of her being wheeled out of surgery. She was bandaged, slung with tubes and monitors, and looked small and very pathetic.

"Clay Elliot's body is down in Pathology, waiting for an autopsy to

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confirm the obvious: death by massive lacerations; that, in fact, he was torn to pieces by a creature who has spent the last half-year proclaiming her love for him."

Technically, Seule was female. People preferred to think of her that way, seeing beauty in her silver eyes and narrow black face. For her to perform an ungraceful act or to step across the boundaries of human expectation into violence was unthinkable. What would happen to her now that she'd done the unthinkable? Sarah pinched the bridge of her nose and lifted her coffee cup.

"Is Seule thankful for being saved from timeless oblivion in space? If I were Seule, I think I would rather have stayed dead."

Sarah yawned, feeling cold and tired. The ersatz coffee was weak and insipid, but she accepted a refill from the waiter. At least it was hot. "I remember the fuss that was made when Seule moved to our town," she said to her journal. "It was announced smugly that The Alien had chosen North Wells because of the excellent research facility where she would work as a member of the team decoding the ship's records. Actually she had been assigned there in an effort to keep her happy and quiet; whether she could do useful work or not was immaterial. It came out that she had developed a passion for one of the scientists studying her, a kinesiologist named Clay Elliot, and was essentially being sent out of harm's way.

"She was pining away apart from him, and needed to work it all out. Farber briefed me ahead of time, using words of one syllable in his usual dickheaded way. He warned me that she'd be reluctant to talk about it."

Sarah snorted. "So she's sent to me, the perfect person to help her get over a bad love affair. It's so stupid. I've never heard of anything so damned stupid in my life." Sarah clicked off the recorder and stuffed it in her bag.

June, 2023; North Wells

Seule had come to Sarah late in spring; now it was summer, their sixth session, and hot. Sarah's office windows were open. Seule was curled on a chair, her main limbs tucked under her smooth mid-section. They were starting to be comfortable with each other. Sarah was still probing the edges of Seule's attitude of cheerful denial of any real problem.

Seule was silvery-rose in color, her dense silky coat more like napped fabric than fur. The mouth in her long, thin head bore an alarming set of teeth revealed when her narrow black lips drew back in a smile or a laugh. She had a human propensity to laugh, a human appreciation for the absurd.

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"People ask if I mind being monitored," said Seule. "I don't. It's necessary." They were talking about freedom; what the word meant when used in the context of Seule's life. "I must be a tempting target."

"Unfortunately, yes," affirmed Sarah, keeping her expression bland. Her long legs were crossed ankle over knee, manlike, and her short brown hair was tucked behind her ears.

She wondered at first if the government had wired her office when Seule had started her sessions, but knew that it didn't make a bit of difference. Of course they had wired it. The bodyguards in her reception area, the eye that hovered outside the building to gain a clear view through her window were all deemed necessary by someone. The eye followed Seule everywhere, and rumor spread that it had the capability of defensive fire. It had not yet been put to the test.

During the last year, Seule had been allowed to travel, to visit private homes, to live relatively unsupervised. Social conventions on how to treat the alien were being formulated ad hoc; so far Seule remained unharmed.

Sarah had read the multi-volume case history Dr. Farber sent her, skipping over the charts and bio-chemical analyses of Seule's flesh and excretions, snorting at the extrapolations as to her kind's origin. Guesses, Sarah had thought. They're only giving her a loose leash now because they can't think of any more tests to run. It's damned pathetic, really.

"Walter Farber has been with you all along, hasn't he?"

Seule's limbs shifted, a silky whisper against the chair's fabric. Absently she poked holes in her unused Kleenex with one of the soft, finger-like projections on her neck.

"Yes, he has. I remember being bounced on his knee, and the expression he wore when I jumped to his shoulder and then to the top of a filing cabinet. He never got used to that sort of thing. I think he wanted me to be more like a human child. Perhaps he still does."

Seule's silver eyes slid past Sarah's. She seemed bored; they'd gone over this before. She leaned forward. "Do you know, he kept my dog until I could find a place here and get him sent out. Would you like to see Amie's picture?"

Seule rummaged in the leather pouch she wore slung around her hind quarters. Seule had mentioned Amie before, with great affection, and Sarah had always found it oddly poignant that the alien had a pet. She accepted the photo-vid Seule passed to her: the alien and her dog, pausing for a moment in a romp, then bounding away in unison. The dog was some kind of wolfhound and looked like a primitive, masculine version of Seule. Sarah could tell by the way the dog moved that he was a true dog, not enhanced, and she felt a small pang. It was hard to look at animals and not see instead the psuedo-human personalities laid on top like icing on a perfectly good cake. Though she missed some of her old

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doggy friends, Sarah was glad that no more enhancement was being done. Dealing with Seule was another order of magnitude entirely. The two, terrestrial dog and space-faring alien, leapt in Sarah's hand until she passed the photo back.

"He's a beautiful animal."

Only one stasis pod in the alien ship had been intact, in what must have been a creche area: it contained the baby Seule. The others held only the dead: thirty thousand years dead, according to analysis of the exterior of their ship and the deterioration of components within. All of her family, and most likely all of her race, were extinct.

"Let's talk about Clay," said Sarah quietly. "If it's all right with you."

Seule's ears drooped immediately, and she curled herself more tightly in the chair.

"Yes. Let's." Her eyes were unreadable, though Sarah had noticed how the moods telegraphed by Seule's lips and ears were easily understood, as one would read joy, or eagerness, or disappointment in a dog's face.

"Have you sent a letter to him, as I suggested last week?"

Seule's ears drew back against the rounded crown of her skull. Her fringe of fingers was completely still for once.

"I can't. What if he doesn't answer?"

"What if he does? Tell me how you'd feel if he answered."

Seule looked away. She replied slowly, choosing words which caught harshly between her pointed teeth. "He won't. I really hope he doesn't, you know. I'm afraid I might abandon all my self-respect and run to him."

"It's been almost six months, Seule. . . ."

"What does time have to do with it? And who else may I love but a human? Human is what I am, though I don't look it. What if my kind mates for life? What if I never get over him?"

"It takes time, I know. Believe me. . . ."

Seule's powerful hind legs propelled her off the chair. She bounded to the window, stared out at maple trees dressed in new green. "I look into a mirror and see this alien thing. But I don't *feel* alien. You humans say I'm lovely, you say I'm exotic, unique. Well, you're right, damn you all. I'm the only one of me, and it hurts."

November, 2023; Washington DC

"It's now four in the morning," said Sarah tiredly into her recorder. "I'm back at the hospital. Washington never goes to sleep completely, certainly a big hospital never slows down. They had to clear a floor for her, which no one here seems happy about, but she'll be whisked off to

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Houston as soon as she's able to be moved." She had to raise her voice over the babble of talk, clacking footsteps, and cell phones beeping.

"Apparently Seule's guardian eye, confused by the fact that Seule was the attacker, didn't try any fancy shooting. It screamed for help and hovered, recording, till someone came. Fortunately, for Seule anyway, that wasn't long. It all happened so fast . . . it was very painful to watch."

Sarah was still shaken. There were few civilians among the tight-lipped men and women in uniforms at the briefing. The videotape was fish-eye distorted, and the sound buzzed and squalled.

Seule and Clayton Elliot were working alone in a mock-up of the alien craft's interior, observing the varied responses of an environmental panel. They were talking quietly, the eye only picking up the odd innocuous phrase. Clayton, a dark, angular man with the weedy look of a student, leaned across his station and took Seule's left forefoot in his hand, forcefully directing it to a spot on the panel. In slow motion replay, Sarah watched his expression. He looked peevish, impatient.

Seule's forefoot, claws sheathed, slid up Clayton's arm and around his neck, pulling him toward her. He drew back. It was obvious that her strength exceeded his. His muscles tensed, his face showed repulsion. Worse, it showed boredom, irritation. When Sarah saw this look, she knew instinctively what would happen next.

Clayton pushed Seule away. Seule clasped him more firmly; he struggled, swore. She began to whine, a high keening. Sarah was familiar with the look of Seule, but this sound was utterly alien. Its meaning was universal. The next few seconds were full of action, too fast to follow well even in slow motion. Clayton struck at her and she raked him with her hind legs, as a cat would a rabbit, still clutching him with her clawed forelegs. She was licking his face as he screamed. Her neck-fingers grasped and stroked his face, his neck, his eyes and mouth.

Hands and bodies intruded suddenly, the eye pulled back, wobbled, and recorded five or six people trying to separate them. Upon being removed from contact with Clayton's body, Seule collapsed and began to slash at her own limbs with her teeth. Someone pulled her head back, two men held her limbs. Crashing noises, shouts, the spurting of blood. It had been, literally, a shambles.

Sarah rubbed her eyes, replaying the scene in her mind, and fought down an intense longing for her own bed in North Wells. She forced herself to sit straight in her orange plastic chair and take a deep breath. The taped scene intruded mercilessly past the blank taupe walls of the visitors' lounge, where she'd gone to hide from the uproar after the briefing.

Her face brightened momentarily. "At least I got a chance to talk to Jim Wright," she told her recorder. "I recognized him as we entered the

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briefing room and figured that of course he'd be here—where else at a time like this? When I was twenty, a junior at Colorado State, I fell madly in love with Jim (didn't we all?); big, handsome, holding the alien baby in his arms. The man who entered the derelict ship and came back with a real E.T. He's still handsome, still a figure of romance, and I got a bit light-headed sitting next to him. Me and my bump of hero-worship. We talked about Seule, and I figured out the kind of man Jim is."

Sarah smiled bleakly. Jim Wright had taken the viewing harder than anyone else, though unlike some others he hadn't turned away. White-faced and flag-pole straight, he'd watched every second of the carnage.

"There's a certain kind of parent who brings their child to me for diagnosis. The kid is ostracized, friendless; usually ugly, often intelligent and artistic. A complete misfit. Everyone except the parent knows the poor kid is a hopeless case; the parent, however, loves this child with a complete, stubborn devotion. The parent never gives up on the idea that someday everything will come out right for the ugly duckling. Jim Wright is that sort of parent. As far as I know he has no children of his own. Only Seule. I wonder if she knows how much he loves her?"

Sarah stopped to blow her nose. She pulled a mirror out of her capacious bag and dabbed haphazardly at her eyes while the recorder paused, waiting for her voice.

"He's left to try calling Yves Giguere, another crew member who is now high up in the European Space Agency, and who might want to be here. None of the others has made it yet, but Jim keeps trying to collect them all by the bedside. I'll tuck this away now, and try again to see her."

Sarah, clad in baggy blue track pants and an unflattering sweater, a huge, crammed bag slung over one shoulder, tangled with the security guard outside Seule's room once again. Before she could make headway, she was waylaid by Dr. Walter Farber. She'd seen him at the briefing and had slipped away before it became necessary to speak to him.

Farber stopped her outside the door, gripping her elbow. "Sarah Lightburn. What are you doing here?"

Sarah frowned at him sullenly. "What's your problem? Everyone in God's creation is here."

Farber relaxed his grip and gave her a sour look. "Hello to you too. Glad you could make it, Sarah. I really am. I'm hoping you'll contribute some ideas."

Sarah jerked her arm free. "Seule and I made progress, whatever you may think. Don't blame me for what went on after she left me."

"And don't you be defensive. I think you're more prickly now than when we were in Colorado."

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"I'm amazed you remember," said Sarah tightly. "It's been a while. And prickles are a form of self-defense."

"Are we going to start in on all that now?" He clamped his teeth together and stared down at her, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and abruptly turned away. When he turned back his face wore a look of apology. "Look. I was twenty years older than you then; I still am. I liked you, Sarah. You were one of my favorites, one of the really good ones. Grad students like you don't come along all the time. I didn't mean anything more."

"Then why—" Sarah stopped, controlled her voice. *What am I doing? Why can't I let it go?* "Why did you let me think I was special to you?"

"You *were* special!"

"You know what I mean. Did you kiss me because my work bolstered up yours? Which did you like better, the curve of my graph or the curve of my breast?"

"Damn." Farber's voice was soft. He ran a hand across his mouth. "Sarah, what do you want me to say? You knew the score, or I thought you did. Beryl was on assignment in China, you were a beautiful girl—"

"Jesus." Sarah shook her head. "You were everything I wanted to be." She paused, biting her lip. "You could so easily have taken me on the assignment with Seule. Why didn't you?"

"You want the truth? It was because, damn it, I needed a clear head for the work. Beryl understood that, and she was out of the country most of the time anyway—truth, remember? We'd battled it out. But you . . . you, I couldn't afford to have around."

"It was my work too!"

"Don't kid yourself, Sarah. I had to make decisions I didn't like, but I believe it was worth it. Personalities could not enter the situation."

Sarah sneered. "Personality was everything, can't you see that?"

Seule's door swung open and a woman bedecked with government insignia put her head out. "Will you two be quiet, please! The alien is awake in here, and she can hear you."

Sarah flushed red. She stepped forward. "I have access to the alien, and I'd like to see her now. If it's all right." Sarah bit her lip hard, and kept her chin up.

"Let me check your badge." The woman ran a sensor across Sarah's clip-on I.D. "Yeah, okay." She eyed Farber, who abruptly turned and stalked off down the corridor.

Inside, Sarah noticed Seule's smell. She remembered finding it unpleasant the first few times Seule came to her office; now it seemed almost to soak into her. It was unlike anything else on earth, but it gave her the feeling of slipping into a sweater borrowed from a friend. The

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olfactory image was wiped out by the sight of Seule strapped onto her bed.

She couldn't turn her head; it was restrained, as were her four main limbs. Only the soft, relatively feeble appendages on her neck were free to move; they fluttered and waved as if blown by a wind. When Seule felt Sarah's eyes on her, the motion stopped and the tendrils fell to lie across her high, arched chest. Sarah moved closer and attempted a smile, but found it too painful an exercise.

"Oh, Seule," she said, gently touching one forelimb on an area not covered by bandages. The animals Sarah had mostly dealt with had been those dosed with intelligence-enhancing drugs. Some had responded to touch, most hadn't. Heightened mentation seemed also to sharpen the sense of individuality; the animals—dogs, apes, cetaceans—were often intractable.

Seule drew her lips back behind the muzzle clamped around her jaws in what Sarah at first thought was a smile of welcome. Feeling a perverse satisfaction in the intimacy she, and not Farber, had been granted, Sarah bent over the softly lit bed.

Seule snarled, a sound like a direct assault. Sarah flinched back in a primal response that was in a split second replaced with anger. Just as quickly, the anger was veneered in professional detachment, but it was still there.

Seule was neither animal nor human. She must remember that. "What's she on?" Sarah asked, addressing the woman who let her in. The reply listed dosages of various drugs being pumped into Seule, which Sarah recognized as standard antibiotics and mild sedatives.

"Okay. Thanks."

Sarah turned to Seule, wary this time and careful to keep her hands in a nonthreatening attitude.

"Seule, do you know why you're here? Do you know what happened?"

For answer there was a high wailing whine that issued from Seule's throat; very doglike, distressing to Sarah's ears. It went on and on; finally Sarah nudged the bed, moving it enough to make Seule's eyes flick to the side and register her.

Seule's black lips moved behind the plastic muzzle, and she spoke. Her whisper was soft, spiritless; the keening whine still echoed in Sarah's ears. "He was with me and he was not with me. He was my friend and he was my enemy. He was with me." She strained her limbs against the straps. "He was not with me."

"You were working with Clay and his team. Everything was going well. Seule, whatever happened, for whatever reason, it's over now."

If this were a human friend or sister who'd suffered a trauma, thought Sarah, I'd know what to do. Hugs, understanding words; more hugs. The

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comfort of warm primate skin against skin. But I don't understand her. She isn't one of us. Sarah found that her arms were tightly crossed over her breasts. Self-consciously she let them relax to her sides.

"He wouldn't touch me," whispered Seule. "We were alone in the lab. He was so beautiful, so soft. . . . I, I thought . . . I held him, he resisted."

"He died."

"He wouldn't touch me. None of you will *touch* me!"

Christ, thought Sarah. She ripped his guts out and almost tore his head from his body. Is that love to her? Thwarted love, frustrated desire; a death sentence to the one Seule chooses?

"I'll touch you, Seule. I, I'm your friend, you know." Tentatively Sarah forced her hand up, stroked Seule's forelimb lying strapped on the white sheet. Seule turned her head away slightly and closed her eyes.

Suddenly Sarah felt an almost irresistible urge to flee the room. The alien's life-blood pulsed under the tips of her fingers, life hot with urges Sarah had imagined only in her darkest, most private moments. She snatched her hand away, stood panting in a flush of heat that burned her face. Thankful that the room was dimly lit, she tried to gather her thoughts. But before she could speak, Seule sighed and shifted her limbs minutely, all that was allowed by the restraints.

"All these years on your planet. I thought it was my home, I thought I was one of you. I listened to Walter Farber and tried to please him, I made friends with the people in Houston. And the men who discovered me—" Here she paused, and her black tongue tried to lick some moisture onto her lips. "Those men. They call me, send me letters and presents. I suppose I'm a mascot, a special toy to them. . . ."

Sarah caught her breath. "Jim Wright is here. He's hanging around trying to get in to see you."

Seule turned her dry, glittering eyes on Sarah. "Don't let him in," she whispered. "I couldn't stand it."

Strangely, it was the lack of tears that disturbed Sarah the most. It had always disturbed her. No need for her, no need for her damned Kleenex. Seule's appearance disturbed her, Seule's intelligent doglike way of moving and sitting and listening, her un-earth smell. Her hot silvery body.

And not a tear for the lonely horror of her life.

"I have to go." Sarah backed away from the bed, turned, pushed through the door to the white-lit corridor. Farber was nowhere to be seen.

She ran for the elevator. During the interminable wait for its arrival, Sarah saw Jim Wright, fast asleep in the visitors' lounge, his head nodding, his knees up. She looked away, pushed the call button again and again.

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Down, alone thank God, down and out the nearest door to the cold night air. The freshness of melting snow piled beside the walkways was like a balm on her nerves; she headed for a bench and slumped down on it, shivering, yet hot with the feel of Seule still in her fingers.

Sarah bent over and clutched her stomach, squeezing her eyes shut. She breathed slowly and deeply, pulling in the moist freezing air which smelled of nothing, not even the damp soil; no scent of alien flesh in her nostrils. She dug her fingers hard into her abdomen.

Oh, god, she wondered darkly, have I really gone so long without a lover? She gasped a little at the pain inside her, under the skin and muscle; it was like the bitter distillation of anger and denial. Poison.

Cautiously she straightened on the hard, slatted bench, very glad she wasn't crying, because she might not be able to stop. That primal longing—how terribly *intense* it was . . . could it be that she had once felt it for Walter? She had forgotten how powerful it was, how lonely and terrible. . . .

"No," she whispered aloud, her breath puffing in the cold. "Walter was a different sort of pain . . . a betrayal, and what I just felt, up there with Seule. . . ." She stopped, confused. What *had* she felt? It had been electric, visceral; unexpected and overwhelmingly demanding. Its dregs had been vinegar. She shook her head, trying to think.

There was a shout from the corner of the building, and she turned to see six or seven newspeople, armed with cameras and lights, bearing down on her. Rising in dismay she looked in vain for an escape and was surrounded.

"Are you a nurse? A doctor? Where is the alien—where is Seule?"

"How bad are her injuries? Will she die?"

One of them checked a fax sheet of photos and called out her name.

"Leave me alone," cried Sarah. "I don't know anything."

"You're Sarah Lightburn, the alien's psychiatrist—"

"I am nothing of the sort! I only counseled her, briefly—" A mistake. The newsies moved in closer and Sarah was forced to push her way past them. One of them caught her by the arm and shouted into her face. "Will the alien be destroyed now? She's a killer."

Sarah stopped, mouth open. "Destroyed? Don't be a fool—"

"Yes," screamed someone from the back of the growing crowd. "She killed one human, she'll kill more!"

"What if there are more aliens coming?"

Sarah, appalled, felt incongruous laughter well up. More of them! Seule would appreciate the irony of that.

"Is it true that Clay Elliot was her lover?"

"Leave me alone!" Sarah bolted for the door. Two security men, attracted by the noise, let her through and closed the thick reinforced glass doors against the reporters.

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* * *

"Oh, journal, I'm so tired. And this coffee is awful. It *must* be almost morning by now."

Sarah looked up at the TV suspended in a corner of the hospital cafeteria. It confirmed her predictions: mobs of Seule denouncers harassing Seule supporters. By now the whole world knew what had happened. "I'm here at the center," whispered Sarah, "and I'm not sure I know anything at all."

Slumping in the chair, she rubbed her eyes. *"Why?* Why did she kill him?" Blinking, she looked up and stared at nothing. "Will we ever really know why she does anything? By now, her life among us may have rendered her incapable of rational behavior, or even whatever instinctive behavior is proper for her race.

"And I really thought I was getting somewhere. Damn . . ."

Sarah sipped her coffee, winced.

"And why did I run away from her? Was it the feel of her flesh on mine?" She felt her face heat with confusion, with shame. "What happened up there, anyway? I, I . . . journal, I find myself having a hard time talking about this."

Sarah Lightburn stared morosely into her cup, wondering if she was losing her mind. She watched her hands place the cup neatly in front of her as the apex of a chevron pattern of plastic knife, fork, spoon, and stir-stick. The cafeteria was growing crowded and noisy with talk and the clatter of dishes as the day shift arrived.

"I can't deal with this right now," she told the journal. She clicked it shut and stowed it in her bag.

Sarah left the cafeteria and headed for the elevators, wondering what kind of man Clayton Elliot had been. She stabbed at the elevator button. Had Elliot treated Seule like an intelligent pet, perhaps expected her to get the coffee? Or was he kind, thoughtful—just a nice guy who simply couldn't find it within his heart to love someone who looked like a dog?

The elevator door opened and she shuffled tiredly on, not noticing until too late that the only other occupant was Farber.

He stood his ground, smiled remotely as she reached across him to push the button. The door closed. Farber put his thumb on the stop button.

"I don't want you to go up to Seule's room just now, Ms. Lightburn," said Farber in a flat voice.

Sarah refrained from pointing out that she had intended only to get to the main floor and out. She withdrew her arm, hauled her heavy bag higher on her shoulder.

"Fine. We'll park right here while you tell me where I *should* go." Sarah wished her voice matched her feelings. She hated the way it went

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high and girlish in a confrontation. Typical female, Sarah sneered at herself. "I'd like to know why you've chosen to blame me. What about Elliot? Is anyone looking into his actions? What kind of background checks did you do on him?"

"That's not what I want to talk about, and besides, it's immaterial. You encouraged her to remain in contact with him. She went off with stars in her eyes, looking for romance." Farber took his thumb off the button and the elevator started upward, called from somewhere above.

"And what's wrong with romance?" Sarah snapped. "What was wrong with that dumb shit Elliot? She loved him. Do you know anything about love, *Doctor* Farber?"

"Sarah, please. This is neither the time nor the place—"

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open onto the sixth floor. Farber, tight-lipped, motioned for Sarah to exit ahead of him; she did, and when he started down the corridor she followed.

"I don't really give a damn any more," she said. "There was a time when you were my hero, right up there with the astronauts, but not any more. I've wised up."

Farber reached a door, keyed it open and stood to one side.

"Well?" he said. "Shall we continue in private, or do you prefer to rant out here?"

Sarah stalked in and threw her bag on the floor beside a table surrounded by straight-backed chairs. It was some sort of meeting room, windowless and stale.

Farber yanked out a chair and dropped into it. He bent over and rubbed his temples. After a moment Sarah sat too. It seemed stupid and childish to keep standing. Hadn't she grown up? Wasn't it impossible for this man to make her do foolish things any more?

Farber looked up, steepling his hands under his chin. It was a mannerism Sarah remembered from long ago. "I did try to keep track of you after I left," he said. "Not all my time was spent with Seule. You distinguished yourself at Colorado, did a couple of years with Arthur Kemp before he went to work for Biostym. Then you disappeared for a while. Let's see . . . I next saw you in Edmonton, at a lecture. You were at the back."

Sarah kept her eyes on the tips of his fingers, unable to speak.

"Believe it or not, it pleased me to see you again, though you left with someone and it didn't seem the right time to renew old acquaintances. I thought that soon I'd meet you at a conference, laugh over old times. You'd be married, I'd have Beryl with me, we'd have drinks. Something." He looked down again. Sarah could barely keep her eyes on him, her urge to run was so strong.

"Why did you resist my counseling Seule?"

"I didn't. When your name came across my desk I thought about what

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might happen, but then I realized that it might be a good idea to have you on board. I'm still not sure if it is, all things considered. Perhaps I was trying to make up for the past. I do know that there's obviously a lot still to learn about Seule."

He sighed deeply, running his fingers over his lips. "When she was just a baby, I'd visit her quarters every day, and every day she'd come leaping at me out of nowhere. I always caught her. It was a game we played, until she got too big. I had to remind her over and over to keep her claws in, to be gentle, to take it easy on us humans."

He looked exhausted. He looked like an old man coming to understand that the best part of his life was ending.

In her mind's eye, Sarah saw Farber as he'd been when he landed the plum assignment. Suave, dark-haired, grinning wolfishly, he had abandoned everything to make Seule his own. He'd been with her from then on, in every newscast, at every conference and study. It's all getting away from him now, she thought. We get old, the children grow up and leave. This one has been a heart-breaker, but then, the special ones always are.

Sarah looked at her watch. Eight o'clock in the morning, and she felt as though sleep did not exist any more, at least on this world. Almost time for the news conference. What an ordeal that was going to be—she was thankful she wouldn't have to be there. She hoped Farber could handle it.

He looked up at her finally. His eyes were unreadable. The eyes show nothing, Sarah told herself—it's the lips, the brows, the tiny muscle-pulls that tell the story. Animals can show their emotions if they're smart enough, if they have anything inside to show . . . Farber tipped his chair back and crossed his ankle over his knee in a way Sarah instantly recognized.

She felt her thoughts realign themselves. Had it really been Walter Farber she wanted? Or did she want what he had, what he *was?* Seule had seduced him away, and all Sarah's tears and anger and wanting had never gotten him back. . . . *Stupid woman,* she jeered at herself. *Daddy loved her more than me!*

And if he'd taken me along to work with Seule, how long would I have been content to be in their exceptionally thick shadows?

Sarah had a sudden merciless vision of herself, an imitation of him, hands steepled and legs crossed in just his way, sagely nodding at a distraught client. She jammed her hands between her knees and almost laughed out loud. Hadn't that been a sort of apology she'd heard a while back? Something about making up for the past?

Sarah leaned forward and stood, stretching her shoulders and running

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her fingers through her hair. She grinned suddenly. "It doesn't matter now. I'm okay. Truce, all right?"

Farber stood too, looking at her uncertainly. He turned for the door, then stopped and looked back at her, clearing his throat. "Within the next few days you'll be getting a request to come to Houston. I'd like you to do some very careful thinking before you make a decision."

Sarah, completely surprised and not knowing what to say, said nothing.

"There's a lot of work to be done," Farber continued. "I'm not sure if we can treat this whole episode as an advance or a setback in our knowledge of Seule. Whatever the verdict, she's going to be locked away for a while. No way around it, I'm afraid. It's hoped you'll have something to contribute."

Farber straightened his tie briskly, seeming to come fully awake by the sheer power of will. "They're broadcasting soon from the directors' boardroom," he said. "I'd better get myself up there." He squinted at her speculatively. "My office will be in touch with you."

He turned and put his hand on the doorknob, then looked back at her as if he was going to say something else, but did not. He left, letting the door remain open behind him.

"Did you really want Clayton Elliot for your lover?" asked Sarah softly, into the gently beeping, monitor-lit dimness of Seule's hospital room. There was a different military nurse on duty now, a man who kept his eyes on her carefully. Sarah ignored him.

"Or did you want him to love you? There's a difference, you know. It has to do with possession. It gets mistaken for love so often. . . ." She stepped closer to the bed.

Seule's eyes seemed brighter now. The look in them of lost despair had retreated a bit, and she turned her head to follow as Sarah moved up beside her.

"I was so jealous of you." Sarah's voice was soft; all the anger had left her. "You didn't know Walter and I had once been lovers, did you? When you came along, he just wasn't interested in me any more. He had found something so absolutely lovely and new that he had to let everything else go." She gazed at Seule almost kindly, feeling light as a husk from which a spoiled seed has been shaken.

"I'll never love Walter again, or even really like him, but I can admire him for what he's done with you. That's good enough."

The alien moved slightly on the bed under her restraints, and her soft pink tendrils undulated across her chest.

"Clayton Elliot wanted you to be a piece of experimental equipment conforming to his thesis. Walter Farber wanted you to be his brilliant,

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beautiful little girl. And I wanted to use you to get next to him, to show him . . . to show that I mattered."

"Sarah," croaked Seule, barely audible.

Sarah backed up a little. She wasn't ready to risk touching Seule again, not yet.

"Sarah." The alien's eyes were on her, those dark-silver, tearless eyes, and Sarah almost stopped breathing. "Please. I'm sorry, I'm sorry I let you feel what I was feeling. I'm . . . so tired of being human, but I don't know how to be anything *else*."

Sarah bit her lip, backing off still farther. She retreated to the window and drew aside the drapes to let in the brightening day. "They're asking me to come to Houston," she said, around a lump in her throat. "Walter wants me, he thinks I can be useful." She swallowed carefully and turned back to the bed. "How . . . how about you? Do you want me there?"

Sarah forced herself to look unflinchingly at Seule.

The alien reached toward Sarah with her neck-tendrils, something she had never done before; she had never touched Sarah unless Sarah initiated it. In fact the alien had deftly avoided contact during their sessions.

A moment of self-doubt, of struggle against the urge to flee, and Sarah stepped forward, bracing herself for whatever might flood into her.

Almost, she didn't feel the first moment of touch, Seule's tendrils were so light and soft and tentative. Like a baby's fingers—warm, slightly sticky, full of innocent life—they gently explored the lengths of Sarah's fingers, probed between them into the soft webs of flesh, slid across the hard nail surfaces. It was, to Sarah, so intensely sensual that she could only watch. The blood pounding in her ears made it impossible to move or react.

Yes, she thought, this is it—that moment, that fragrance sweet and strong; this is what it means.

And under the sweetness was a bitter taste, and behind the new light the shadow of a permanent darkness that could never pass; Sarah knew it. There were no miracles to offer, only friendship to ease the path.

"Yes, please come with me," whispered Seule. ●

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COCOON

Greg Egan

Last year, the author's novel *Quarantine*, published in 1992 by Random House (UK), won Australia's prestigious Ditmar award. The British edition of his latest novel, *Permutation City*, has just been released by Orion under their Millennium imprint.

art: Janet Aulisio

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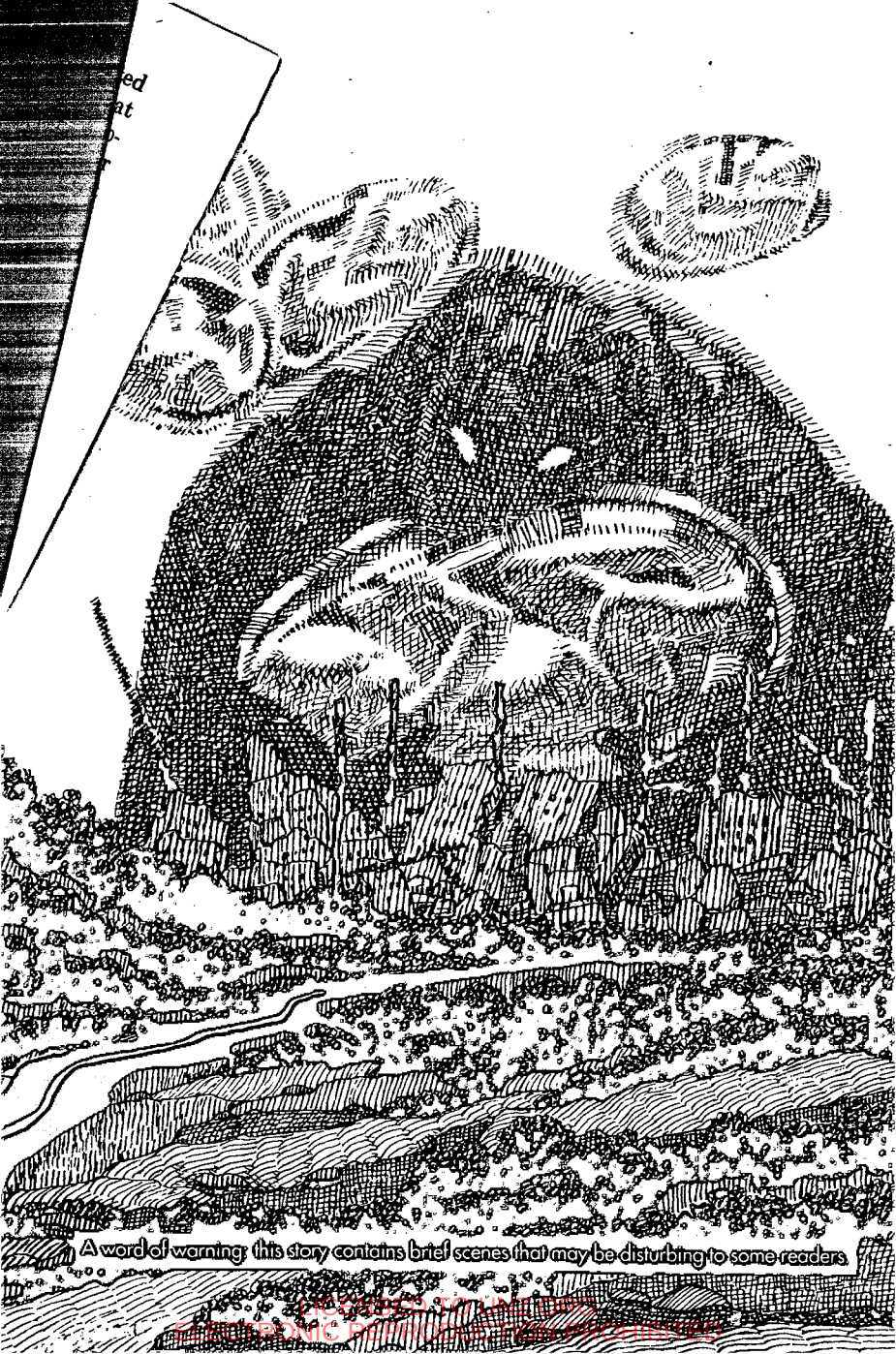
A word of warning: this story contains brief scenes that may be disturbing to some readers.

The explosion shattered windows hundreds of meters away, but star no fire. Later, I discovered that it had shown up on a seismograph Macquarie University, fixing the time precisely: 3:52 A.M. Residents w ken by the blast phoned emergency services within minutes, and ou night shift operator called me just after four, but there was no poin rushing to the scene when I'd only be in the way. I sat at the termina in my study for almost an hour, assembling background data and moni toring the radio traffic on headphones, drinking coffee and trying not tc type too loudly.

By the time I arrived, the local fire service contractors had departed, having certified that there was no risk of further explosions, but our forensic people were still poring over the wreckage, the electric hum of their equipment all but drowned out by birdsong. Lane Cove was a quiet, leafy suburb, mixed residential and high-tech industrial, the lush vegetation of corporate open spaces blending almost seamlessly into the adjacent national park that straddled the Lane Cove River. The map of the area on my car terminal had identified suppliers of laboratory reagents and pharmaceuticals, manufacturers of precision instruments for scientific and aerospace applications, and no less than twenty-seven biotechnology firms—including Life Enhancement International, the erstwhile sprawling concrete building now reduced to a collection of white powdery blocks clustered around twisted reinforcement rods. The exposed steel glinted in the early light, disconcertingly pristine; the building was only three years old. I could understand why the forensic team had ruled out an accident at their first glance; a few drums of organic solvent could not have done anything remotely like *this*. Nothing legally stored in a residential zone could reduce a modern building to rubble in a matter of seconds.

I spotted Janet Lansing as I left my car. She was surveying the ruins with an expression of stoicism, but she was hugging herself. Mild shock, probably. She had no other reason to be chilly; it had been stinking hot all night, and the temperature was already climbing. Lansing was Director of the Lane Cove complex: forty-three years old, with a Ph.D in molecular biology from Cambridge, and an M.B.A. from an equally reputable Japanese virtual university. I'd had my knowledge miner extract her details, and photo, from assorted databases before I'd left home

I approached her and said, "James Glass, Nexus Investigations." She frowned at my business card, but accepted it, then glanced at the technicians trawling their gas chromatographs and holography equipment around the perimeter of the ruins.

"They're yours, I suppose?"

"Yes. They've been here since four."

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She smirked slightly. "What happens if I give the job to someone else? And charge the lot of you with trespass?"

"If you hire another company, we'll be happy to hand over all the samples and data we've collected."

She nodded distractedly. "I'll hire you, of course. Since four? I'm impressed. You've even arrived before the insurance people." As it happened, LEI's "insurance people" owned 49 percent of Nexus, and would stay out of the way until we were finished, but I didn't see any reason to mention that. Lansing added sourly, "Our so-called security firm only worked up the courage to phone me half an hour ago. Evidently a fiber-optic junction box was sabotaged, disconnecting the whole area. They're supposed to send in patrols in the event of equipment failure, but apparently they didn't bother."

I grimaced sympathetically. "What exactly were you people making here?"

"Making? Nothing. We did no manufacturing; this was pure R & D."

In fact, I'd already established that LEI's factories were all in Thailand and Indonesia, with the head office in Monaco, and research facilities scattered around the world. There's a fine line, though, between demonstrating that the facts are at your fingertips, and unnerving the client. A total stranger *ought* to make at least one trivial wrong assumption, ask at least one misguided question. I always do.

"So what were you researching and developing?"

"That's commercially sensitive information."

I took my notepad from my shirt pocket and displayed a standard contract, complete with the usual secrecy provisions. She glanced at it, then had her own computer scrutinize the document. Conversing in modulated infrared, the machines rapidly negotiated the fine details. My notepad signed the agreement electronically on my behalf, and Lansing's did the same, then they both chimed happily in unison to let us know that the deal had been concluded.

Lansing said, "Our main project here was engineering improved syncytiotrophoblastic cells." I smiled patiently, and she translated for me. "Strengthening the barrier between the maternal and fetal blood supplies. Mother and fetus don't share blood directly, but they exchange nutrients and hormones across the placental barrier. The trouble is, all kinds of viruses, toxins, pharmaceuticals and illicit drugs can also cross over. The natural barrier cells didn't evolve to cope with AIDS, fetal alcohol syndrome, cocaine-addicted babies, or the next thalidomidelike disaster. We're aiming for a single intravenous injection of a gene-tailoring vector, which would trigger the formation of an extra layer of cells in the appropriate structures within the placenta, specifically designed to shield the fetal blood supply from contaminants in the maternal blood."

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"A thicker barrier?"

"Smarter. More selective. More choosy about what it lets through. We know exactly what the developing fetus actually *needs* from the maternal blood. These gene-tailored cells would contain specific channels for transporting each of those substances. Nothing else would be allowed through."

"Very impressive." *A cocoon around the unborn child, shielding it from all of the poisons of modern society.* It sounded exactly like the kind of beneficent technology a company called Life Enhancement would be hatching in leafy Lane Cove. True, even a layman could spot a few flaws in the scheme. I'd heard that AIDS most often infected children during birth itself, not pregnancy—but presumably there were other viruses that crossed the placental barrier more frequently. I had no idea whether or not mothers at risk of giving birth to children stunted by alcohol or addicted to cocaine were likely to rush out *en masse* and have gene-tailored fetal barriers installed—but I could picture a strong demand from people terrified of food additives, pesticides, and pollutants. In the long term—if the system actually worked, and wasn't prohibitively expensive—it could even become a part of routine prenatal care.

Beneficent, and lucrative.

In any case—whether or not there were biological, economic, and social factors which might keep the technology from being a complete success . . . it was hard to imagine anyone objecting to *the principle of the thing*.

I said, "Were you working with animals?"

Lansing scowled. "Only early calf embryos, and disembodied bovine uteruses on tissue-support machines. If it was an animal rights group, they would have been better off bombing an abattoir."

"Mmm." In the past few years, the Sydney chapter of Animal Equality—the only group known to use such extreme methods—had concentrated on primate research facilities. They might have changed their focus, or been misinformed, but LEI still seemed like an odd target; there were plenty of laboratories widely known to use whole, live rats and rabbits as if they were disposable test tubes—many of them quite close by. "What about competitors?"

"No one else is pursuing this kind of product line, so far as I know. There's no race being run; we've already obtained individual patents for all of the essential components—the membrane channels, the transporter molecules—so any competitor would have to pay us license fees, regardless."

"What if someone simply wanted to damage you, financially?"

"Then they should have bombed one of the factories instead. Cutting

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off our cash flow would have been the best way to hurt us; this laboratory wasn't earning a cent."

"Your share price will still take a dive, won't it? Nothing makes investors nervous quite so much as terrorism."

Lansing agreed, reluctantly. "But then, whoever took advantage of that and launched a takeover bid would suffer the same taint, themselves. I don't deny that commercial sabotage takes place in this industry, now and then . . . but not on a level as crude as this. Genetic engineering is a subtle business. Bombs are for fanatics."

Perhaps. But who would be fanatically opposed to the idea of shielding human embryos from viruses and poisons? Several religious sects flatly rejected any kind of modification to human biology . . . but the ones who employed violence were far more likely to have bombed a manufacturer of abortifacient drugs than a laboratory dedicated to the task of *safeguarding* the unborn child.

Elaine Chang, head of the forensic team, approached us. I introduced her to Lansing. Elaine said, "It was a very professional job. If you'd hired demolition experts, they wouldn't have done a single thing differently. But then, they probably would have used identical software to compute the timing and placement of the charges." She held up her notepad, and displayed a stylized reconstruction of the building, with hypothetical explosive charges marked. She hit a button and the simulation crumbled into something very like the actual mess behind us.

She continued, "Most reputable manufacturers these days imprint every batch of explosives with a trace element signature, which remains in the residue. We've linked the charges used here to a batch stolen from a warehouse in Singapore five years ago."

I added, "Which may not be a great help, though, I'm afraid. After five years on the black market, they could have changed hands a dozen times."

Elaine returned to her equipment. Lansing was beginning to look a little dazed. I said, "I'd like to talk to you again, later—but I am going to need a list of your employees, past and present, as soon as possible."

She nodded, and hit a few keys on her notepad, transferring the list to mine. She said, "Nothing's been lost, really. We had off-site backup for all of our data, administrative and scientific. And we have frozen samples of most of the cell lines we were working on, in a vault in Milson's Point."

Commercial data backup would be all but untouchable, with the records stored in a dozen or more locations scattered around the world—heavily encrypted, of course. Cell lines sounded more vulnerable. I said, "You'd better let the vault's operators know what's happened."

"I've already done that; I phoned them on my way here." She gazed at the wreckage. "The insurance company will pay for the rebuilding. In

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six months' time, we'll be back on our feet. So whoever did this was wasting their time. The work will go on."

I said, "Who would want to stop it in the first place?"

Lansing's faint smirk appeared again, and I very nearly asked her what she found so amusing. But people often act incongruously in the face of disasters, large or small; nobody had died, she wasn't remotely hysterical, but it would have been strange if a setback like this hadn't knocked her slightly out of kilter.

She said, "*You* tell *me*. That's your job, isn't it?"

Martin was in the living room when I arrived home that evening. Working on his costume for the Mardi Gras. I couldn't imagine what it would look like when it was completed, but there were definitely feathers involved. Blue feathers. I did my best to appear composed, but I could tell from his expression that he'd caught an involuntary flicker of distaste on my face as he looked up. We kissed anyway, and said nothing about it.

Over dinner, though, he couldn't help himself.

"Fortieth anniversary this year, James. Sure to be the biggest yet. You could at least come and watch." His eyes glinted; he enjoyed needling me. We'd had this argument five years running, and it was close to becoming a ritual as pointless as the parade itself.

I said flatly, "Why would I want to watch ten thousand drag queens ride down Oxford Street, blowing kisses to the tourists?"

"Don't exaggerate. There'll only be a thousand men in drag, at most."

"Yeah, the rest will be in sequined jockstraps."

"If you actually came and watched, you'd discover that most people's imaginations have progressed far beyond that."

I shook my head, bemused. "If people's imaginations had *progressed,* there'd be no Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras at all. It's a freak show, for people who want to live in a cultural ghetto. Forty years ago, it might have been . . . provocative. Maybe it did some good, back then. But *now?* What's the point? There are no laws left to change, there's no politics left to address. This kind of thing just recycles the same moronic stereotypes, year after year."

Martin said smoothly, "It's a public reassertion of the right to diverse sexuality. Just because it's no longer a *protest march* as well as a celebration doesn't mean it's irrelevant. And complaining about stereotypes is like . . . complaining about the characters in a medieval morality play. The costumes are code, shorthand. Give the great unwashed heterosexual masses credit for some intelligence; they don't watch the parade and conclude that the average gay man spends all his time in a gold lamé

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tutu. People aren't that literal-minded. They all learnt semiotics in kindergarten, they know how to decode the message."

"I'm sure they do. But it's still the wrong message: it makes exotic what ought to be mundane. Okay, people have the right to dress up any way they like and march down Oxford Street . . . but it means absolutely nothing to me."

"I'm not asking you to join in—"

"Very wise."

"—but if one hundred thousand straights can turn up, to show their support for the gay community, why can't you?"

I said wearily, "Because every time I hear the word *community,* I know I'm being manipulated. If there *is* such a thing as *the gay community,* I'm certainly not a part of it. As it happens, I don't want to spend my life watching *gay and lesbian* television channels, using *gay and lesbian* news systems . . . or going to *gay and lesbian* street parades. It's all so . . . proprietary. You'd think there was a multinational corporation who had the franchise rights on homosexuality. And if you don't *market the product* their way, you're some kind of second-class, inferior, bootleg, unauthorized queer."

Martin cracked up. When he finally stopped laughing, he said, "Go on. I'm waiting for you to get to the part where you say you're no more proud of being gay than you are of having brown eyes, or black hair, or a birthmark behind your left knee."

I protested, "That's true. Why should I be 'proud' of something I was born with? I'm not proud, *or* ashamed. I just *accept* it. And I don't have to join a parade to prove that."

"So you'd rather we all stayed invisible?"

"*Invisible!* You're the one who told me that the representation rates in movies and TV last year were close to the true demographics. And if you hardly even *notice it* anymore when an openly gay or lesbian politician gets elected, that's because it's *no longer an issue.* To most people, now, it's about as significant as . . . being left or right handed."

Martin seemed to find this suggestion surreal. "Are you trying to tell me that it's now a *non-subject?* That the inhabitants of this planet are now absolutely impartial on the question of sexual preference? Your faith is touching—but . . ." He mimed incredulity.

I said, "We're equal before the law with any heterosexual couple, aren't we? And when was the last time you told someone you were gay and they so much as blinked? And yes, I know, there are dozens of countries where it's still illegal—along with joining the wrong political parties, or the wrong religions. Parades in Oxford Street aren't going to change *that.*"

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"People are still bashed *in this city*. People are *still* discriminated against."

"Yeah. And people are also shot dead in peak-hour traffic for playing the wrong music on their car stereos, or denied jobs because they live in the wrong suburbs. I'm not talking about the perfection of human nature. I just want you to acknowledge one tiny victory: leaving out a few psychotics, and a few fundamentalist bigots . . . most people *just don't care*."

Martin said ruefully, "If only that were true!"

The argument went on for more than an hour—ending in a stalemate, as usual. But then, neither one of us had seriously expected to change the other's mind.

I did catch myself wondering afterward, though, if I really believed all of my own optimistic rhetoric. *About as significant as being left or right handed?* Certainly, that was the line taken by most Western politicians, academics, essayists, talk show hosts, soap opera writers, and mainstream religious leaders . . . but the same people had been espousing equally high-minded principles of racial equality for decades, and the reality still hadn't entirely caught up on *that* front. I'd suffered very little discrimination, myself—by the time I reached high school, tolerance was hip, and I'd witnessed a constant stream of improvements since then . . . but how could I ever know precisely how much hidden prejudice remained? By interrogating my own straight friends? By reading the sociologists' latest attitude surveys? People will always tell you what they think you want to hear.

Still, it hardly seemed to matter. Personally, I could get by without the deep and sincere approval of every other member of the human race. Martin and I were lucky enough to have been born into a time and place where, in almost every tangible respect, we were treated as equal.

What more could anyone hope for?

In bed that night, we made love very slowly, at first just kissing and stroking each other's bodies for what seemed like hours. Neither of us spoke, and in the stupefying heat I lost all sense of belonging to any other time, any other reality. Nothing existed but the two of us; the rest of the world, the rest of my life, went spinning away into the darkness.

The investigation moved slowly. I interviewed every current member of LEI's workforce, then started on the long list of past employees. I still believed that commercial sabotage was the most likely explanation for such a professional job—but blowing up the opposition is a desperate measure; a little civilized espionage usually comes first. I was hoping that someone who'd worked for LEI might have been approached in the past and offered money for inside information—and if I could find just one

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employee who'd turned down a bribe, they might have learnt something useful from their contact with the presumed rival.

Although the Lane Cove facility had only been built three years before, LEI had operated a research division in Sydney for twelve years before that, in North Ryde, not far away. Many of the ex-employees from that period had moved interstate or overseas; quite a few had been transferred to LEI divisions in other countries. Still, almost no one had changed their personal phone numbers, so I had very little trouble tracking them down.

The exception was a biochemist named Catherine Mendelsohn; the number listed for her in the LEI staff records had been canceled. There were seventeen people with the same surname and initials in the national phone directory; none admitted to being Catherine Alice Mendelsohn, and none looked at all like the staff photo I had.

Mendelsohn's address in the Electoral Roll, an apartment in Newtown, matched the LEI records—but the same address was in the phone directory (and Electoral Roll) for Stanley Goh, a young man who told me that he'd never met Mendelsohn. He'd been leasing the apartment for the past eighteen months.

Credit rating databases gave the same out-of-date address. I couldn't access tax, banking, or utilities records without a warrant. I had my knowledge miner scan the death notices, but there was no match there.

Mendelsohn had worked for LEI until about a year before the move to Lane Cove. She'd been part of a team working on a gene-tailoring system for ameliorating menstrual side-effects, and although the Sydney division had always specialized in gynecological research, for some reason the project was about to be moved to Texas. I checked the industry publications; apparently, LEI had been rearranging all of its operations at the time, gathering together projects from around the globe into new multi-disciplinary configurations, in accordance with the latest fashionable theories of research dynamics. Mendelsohn had declined the transfer, and had been retrenched.

I dug deeper. The staff records showed that Mendelsohn had been questioned by security guards after being found on the North Ryde premises late at night, two days before her dismissal. Workaholic biotechnologists aren't uncommon, but starting the day at two in the morning shows exceptional dedication, especially when the company has just tried to shuffle you off to Amarillo. Having turned down the transfer, she must have known what was in store.

Nothing came of the incident, though. And even if Mendelsohn *had* been planning some minor act of sabotage, that hardly established any connection with a bombing four years later. She might have been angry enough to leak confidential information to one of LEI's rivals . . . but

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whoever had bombed the Lane Cove laboratory would have been more interested in someone who'd worked on the fetal barrier project itself—a project which had only come into existence a year after Mendelsohn had been sacked.

I pressed on through the list. Interviewing the ex-employees was frustrating; almost all of them were still working in the biotechnology industry, and they would have been an ideal group to poll on the question of *who would benefit most* from LEI's misfortune—but the confidentiality agreement I'd signed meant that I couldn't disclose anything about the research in question—not even to people working for LEI's other divisions.

The one thing which I *could* discuss drew a blank: if anyone had been offered a bribe, they weren't talking about it—and no magistrate was going to sign a warrant letting me loose on a fishing expedition through a hundred and seventeen people's financial records.

Forensic examination of the ruins, and the sabotaged fiber-optic exchange, had yielded the usual catalogue of minutiae which might eventually turn out to be invaluable—but none of it was going to conjure up a suspect out of thin air.

Four days after the bombing—just as I found myself growing desperate for a fresh angle on the case—I had a call from Janet Lansing.

The backup samples of the project's gene-tailored cell lines had been destroyed.

The vault in Milson's Point turned out to be directly underneath a section of the Harbor Bridge—built right into the foundations on the north shore. Lansing hadn't arrived yet, but the head of security for the storage company, an elderly man called David Asher, showed me around. Inside, the traffic was barely audible, but the vibration coming through the floor felt like a constant mild earthquake. The place was cavernous, dry and cool. At least a hundred cryogenic freezers were laid out in rows; heavily clad pipes ran between them, replenishing their liquid nitrogen.

Asher was understandably morose, but cooperative. Celluloid movie film had been archived here, he explained, before everything went digital; the present owners specialized in biological materials. There were no guards physically assigned to the vault, but the surveillance cameras and alarm systems looked impressive, and the structure itself must have been close to impregnable.

Lansing had phoned the storage company, Biofile, on the morning of the bombing. Asher confirmed that he'd sent someone down from their North Sydney office to check the freezer in question. Nothing was missing—but he'd promised to boost security measures immediately. Because

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the freezers were supposedly tamper-proof, and individually locked, clients were normally allowed access to the vault at their convenience, monitored by the surveillance cameras, but otherwise unsupervised. Asher had promised Lansing that, henceforth, nobody would enter the building without a member of his staff to accompany them—and he claimed that nobody had been inside since the day of the bombing, anyway.

When two LEI technicians had arrived that morning to carry out an inventory, they'd found the expected number of culture flasks, all with the correct bar code labels, all tightly sealed—but the appearance of their contents was subtly wrong. The translucent frozen colloid was more opalescent than cloudy; an untrained eye might never have noticed the difference, but apparently it spoke volumes to the cognoscenti.

The technicians had taken a number of the flasks away for analysis; LEI were working out of temporary premises, a sub-leased corner of a paint manufacturer's quality control lab. Lansing had promised me preliminary test results by the time we met.

Lansing arrived, and unlocked the freezer. With gloved hands, she lifted a flask out of the swirling mist and held it up for me to inspect.

She said, "We've only thawed three samples, but they all look the same. The cells have been torn apart."

"How?" The flask was covered with such heavy condensation that I couldn't have said if it was empty or full, let alone *cloudy* or *opalescent.*

"It looks like radiation damage."

My skin crawled. I peered into the depths of the freezer; all I could make out were the tops of rows of identical flasks—*but if one of them had been spiked with a radioisotope . . .*

Lansing scowled. "Relax." She tapped a small electronic badge pinned to her lab coat, with a dull gray face like a solar cell: a radiation dosimeter. "*This* would be screaming if we were being exposed to anything significant. Whatever the source of the radiation was, it's no longer in here—and it hasn't left the walls glowing. Your future offspring are safe."

I let that pass. "You think all the samples will turn out to be ruined? You won't be able to salvage anything?"

Lansing was stoical as ever. "It looks that way. There are some elaborate techniques we could use, to try to repair the DNA—but it will probably be easier to synthesize fresh DNA from scratch, and re-introduce it into unmodified bovine placental cell lines. We still have all the sequence data; that's what matters in the end."

I pondered the freezer's locking system, the surveillance cameras. "Are you sure that the source was *inside* the freezer? Or could the damage have been done without actually breaking in—right through the walls?"

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She thought it over. "Maybe. There's not much metal in these things; they're mostly plastic foam. But I'm not a radiation physicist; your forensic people will probably be able to give you a better idea of what happened, once they've checked out the freezer itself. If there's damage to the polymers in the foam, it might be possible to use that to reconstruct the geometry of the radiation field."

A forensic team was on its way. I said, "How would they have done it? Walked casually by, and just—?"

"Hardly. A source which could do this in one quick hit would have been unmanageable. It's far more likely to have been a matter of weeks, or months, of low-level exposure."

"So they must have smuggled some kind of device into *their own freezer,* and aimed it at yours? But then . . . we'll be able to trace the effects right back to the source, won't we? So how could they have hoped to get away with it?"

Lansing said, "It's even simpler than that. We're talking about a modest amount of a gamma-emitting isotope, not some billion-dollar particle-beam weapon. The effective range would be a couple of meters, at most. If it *was* done from the outside, you've just narrowed down your suspect list to two." She thumped the freezer's left neighbor in the aisle, then did the same to the one on the right—and said, "Aha."

"What?"

She thumped them both again. The second one sounded hollow. I said, "No liquid nitrogen? It's not in use?"

Lansing nodded. She reached for the handle.

Asher said, "I don't think—"

The freezer was unlocked, the lid swung open easily. Lansing's badge started beeping—and, worse, *there was something in there, with batteries and wires. . . .*

I don't know what kept me from knocking her to the floor—but Lansing, untroubled, lifted the lid all the way. She said mildly, "Don't panic; this dose rate's nothing. Threshold of detectable."

The thing inside looked superficially like a home-made bomb—but the batteries and timer chip I'd glimpsed were wired to a heavy-duty solenoid, which was part of an elaborate shutter mechanism on one side of a large, metallic gray box.

Lansing said, "Cannibalized medical source, probably. You know these things have turned up in *garbage dumps?*" She unpinned her badge and waved it near the box; the pitch of the alarm increased, but only slightly. "Shielding seems to be intact."

I said, as calmly as possible, "These people have access to *high explosives.* You don't have any idea what the fuck might be in there, or what

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it's wired up to do. This is the point where we walk out, quietly, and leave it to the bomb-disposal robots."

She seemed about to protest, but then she nodded contritely. The three of us went up onto the street, and Asher called the local terrorist services contractor. I suddenly realized that they'd have to divert all traffic from the bridge. The Lane Cove bombing had received some perfunctory media coverage—but *this* would lead the evening news.

I took Lansing aside. "They've destroyed your laboratory. They've wiped out your cell lines. Your data may be almost impossible to locate and corrupt—so the next logical target is you and your employees. Nexus doesn't provide protective services, but I can recommend a good firm."

I gave her the phone number; she accepted it with appropriate solemnity. "So you finally believe me? These people aren't commercial saboteurs. They're dangerous fanatics."

I was growing impatient with her vague references to "fanatics." "Who exactly do you have in mind?"

She said darkly, "We're tampering with certain . . . *natural processes*. You can draw your own conclusions, can't you?"

There was no logic to that at all. God's Image would probably want to *force* all pregnant women with HIV infections, or drug habits, to use the cocoon; they wouldn't try to bomb the technology out of existence. Gaia's Soldiers were more concerned with genetically engineered crops and bacteria than trivial modifications to insignificant species like humans—and they wouldn't have used *radioisotopes* if the fate of the planet depended on it. Lansing was beginning to sound thoroughly paranoid—although in the circumstances, I couldn't really blame her.

I said, "I'm not drawing any conclusions. I'm just advising you to take some sensible precautions, because we have no way of knowing how far this might escalate. But . . . Biofile must lease freezer space to every one of your competitors. A commercial rival would have found it a thousand times easier than any hypothetical sect member to get into the vault to plant that thing."

A gray armor-plated van screeched to a halt in front of us; the back door swung up, ramps slid down, and a squat, multi-limbed robot on treads descended. I raised a hand in greeting and the robot did the same; the operator was a friend of mine.

Lansing said, "You may be right. But then, there's nothing to stop a terrorist from having a day job in biotechnology, is there?"

The device turned out not to be booby-trapped at all—just rigged to spray LEI's precious cells with gamma rays for six hours, starting at midnight, every night. Even in the unlikely event that someone had come into the vault in the early hours and wedged themselves into the

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narrow gap between the freezers, the dose they received would not have been much; as Lansing had suggested, it was the cumulative effect over months which had done the damage. The radioisotope in the box was cobalt 60, almost certainly a decomissioned medical source—grown too weak for its original use, but still too hot to be discarded—stolen from a "cooling off" site. No such theft had been reported, but Elaine Chang's assistants were phoning around the hospitals, trying to persuade them to re-inventory their concrete bunkers.

Cobalt 60 was dangerous stuff—but fifty milligrams in a carefully shielded container wasn't exactly a tactical nuclear weapon. The news systems went berserk, though: ATOMIC TERRORISTS STRIKE HARBOR BRIDGE, et cetera. If LEI's enemies *were* activists, with some "moral cause" which they hoped to set before the public, they clearly had the worst PR advisers in the business. Their prospects of gaining the slightest sympathy had vanished, the instant the first news reports had mentioned the word *radiation.*

My secretarial software issued polite statements of "No comment" on my behalf, but camera crews began hovering outside my front door, so I relented and mouthed a few news-speak sentences for them which meant essentially the same thing. Martin looked on, amused—and then I looked on, astonished, as Janet Lansing's own doorstop media conference appeared on TV.

"These people are clearly ruthless. Human life, the environment, radioactive contamination . . . all mean nothing to them."

"Do you have any idea who might be responsible for this outrage, Dr. Lansing?"

"I can't disclose that, yet. All I can reveal, right now, is that our research is at the very cutting edge of preventative medicine—and I'm not at all surprised that there are powerful vested interests working against us."

Powerful vested interests? What was *that* meant to be code for—if not the rival biotechnology firm whose involvement she kept denying? No doubt she had her eye on the publicity advantages of being the victim of ATOMIC TERRORISTS—but I thought she was wasting her breath. In two or more years' time, when the product finally hit the market, the story would be long forgotten.

After some tricky jurisdictional negotiations, Asher finally sent me six months' worth of files from the vault's surveillance cameras—all that they kept. The freezer in question had been unused for almost two years; the last authorized tenant was a small IVF clinic which had gone bankrupt. Only about 60 percent of the freezers were currently leased, so it

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wasn't particularly surprising that LEI had had a conveniently empty neighbor.

I ran the surveillance files through image-processing software, in the hope that someone might have been caught in the act of opening the unused freezer. The search took almost an hour of supercomputer time—and turned up precisely nothing. A few minutes later, Elaine Chang popped her head into my office to say that she'd finished her analysis of the damage to the freezer walls: the nightly irradiation had been going on for between eight and nine months.

Undeterred, I scanned the files again, this time instructing the software to assemble a gallery of every individual sighted inside the vault.

Sixty-two faces emerged. I put company names to all of them, matching the times of each sighting to Biofile's records of the use of each client's electronic key. No obvious inconsistencies showed up; nobody had been seen inside who hadn't used an authorized key to gain access—and the same people had used the same keys, again and again.

I flicked through the gallery, wondering what to do next. *Search for anyone glancing slyly in the direction of the radioactive freezer?* The software could have done it—but I wasn't quite ready for barrel-scraping efforts like that.

I came to a face which looked familiar: a blonde woman in her mid-thirties, who'd used the key belonging to Federation Centennial Hospital's Oncology Research Unit, three times. I was certain that I knew her, but I couldn't recall where I'd seen her before. It didn't matter; after a few seconds' searching, I found a clear shot of the name badge pinned to her lab coat. All I had to do was zoom in.

The badge read: C. MENDELSOHN.

There was a knock on my open door. I turned from the screen; Elaine was back, looking pleased with herself.

She said, "We've finally found a place who'll own up to having lost some cobalt 60. What's more . . . the activity of our source fits their missing item's decay curve, exactly."

"So where was it stolen from?"

"Federation Centennial."

I phoned the Oncology Research Unit. Yes, Catherine Mendelsohn worked there—she'd done so for almost four years—but they couldn't put me through to her; she'd been on sick leave all week. They gave me the same canceled phone number as LEI—but a different address, an apartment in Petersham. The address wasn't listed in the phone directory; I'd have to go there in person.

A cancer research team would have no reason to want to harm LEI, but a commercial rival—with or without their own key to the vault

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—could still have paid Mendelsohn to do their work for them. It seemed like a lousy deal to me, whatever they'd offered her—if she was convicted, every last cent would be traced and confiscated—but bitterness over her sacking might have clouded her judgment.

Maybe. Or maybe that was all too glib.

I replayed the shots of Mendelsohn taken by the surveillance cameras. She did nothing unusual, nothing suspicious. She went straight to the ORU's freezer, put in whatever samples she'd brought, and departed. She didn't glance slyly in any direction at all.

The fact that she had been inside the vault—on legitimate business—proved nothing. The fact that the cobalt 60 had been stolen from the hospital where she worked could have been pure coincidence.

And anyone had the right to cancel their phone service.

I pictured the steel reinforcement rods of the Lane Cove laboratory, glinting in the sunlight.

On the way out, reluctantly, I took a detour to the basement. I sat at a console while the armaments safe checked my fingerprints, took breath samples and a retinal blood spectrogram, ran some perception-and-judgment response time tests, then quizzed me for five minutes about the case. Once it was satisfied with my reflexes, my motives, and my state of mind, it issued me a nine-millimeter pistol and a shoulder holster.

Mendelsohn's apartment block was a concrete box from the 1960s, front doors opening onto long shared balconies, no security at all. I arrived just after seven, to the smell of cooking and the sound of game show applause, wafting from a hundred open windows. The concrete still shimmered with the day's heat; three flights of stairs left me coated in sweat. Mendelsohn's apartment was silent, but the lights were on.

She answered the door. I introduced myself, and showed her my ID. She seemed nervous, but not surprised.

She said, "I still find it galling to have to deal with people like you."

"People like—?"

"I was opposed to privatizing the police force. I helped organize some of the marches."

She would have been fourteen years old at the time—a precocious political activist.

She let me in, begrudgingly. The living room was modestly furnished, with a terminal on a desk in one corner.

I said, "I'm investigating the bombing of Life Enhancement International. You used to work for them, up until about four years ago. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me why you left?"

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She repeated what I knew about the transfer of her project to the Amarillo division. She answered every question directly, looking me straight in the eye; she still appeared nervous, but she seemed to be trying to read some vital piece of information from my demeanor. *Wondering if I'd traced the cobalt?*

"What were you doing on the North Ryde premises at two in the morning, two days before you were sacked?"

She said, "I wanted to find out what LEI was planning for the new building. I wanted to know why they didn't want me to stick around."

"Your job was moved to Texas."

She laughed drily. "The work wasn't *that* specialized. I could have swapped jobs with someone who wanted to travel to the States. It would have been the perfect solution—and there would have been plenty of people more than happy to trade places with me. But no, that wasn't allowed."

"So . . . did you find the answer?"

"Not that night. But later, yes."

I said carefully, "So you knew what LEI was doing in Lane Cove?"

"Yes."

"How did you discover that?"

"I kept an ear to the ground. Nobody who'd stayed on would have told me directly, but word leaked out, eventually. About a year ago."

"*Three years after you'd left?* Why were you still interested? Did you think there was a market for the information?"

She said, "Put your notepad in the bathroom sink and run the tap on it."

I hesitated, then complied. When I returned to the living room, she had her face in her hands. She looked up at me grimly.

"*Why was I still interested?* Because I wanted to know why *every project* with any lesbian or gay team members was being transferred out of the division. I wanted to know if that was pure coincidence. Or not."

I felt a sudden chill in the pit of my stomach. I said, "If you had some problem with discrimination, there are avenues you could have—"

Mendelsohn shook her head impatiently. "LEI was never *discriminatory*. They didn't sack anyone who was willing to move—and they always transferred the entire team; there was nothing so crude as picking out *individuals* by sexual preference. And they had a rationalization for everything: projects were being re-grouped between divisions to facilitate 'synergistic cross-pollination.' And if that sounds like pretentious bullshit, it was—but it was plausible pretentious bullshit. Other corporations have adopted far more ridiculous schemes, in perfect sincerity."

"But if it wasn't a matter of discrimination . . . why should LEI want to force people out of one particular division—?"

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I think I'd finally guessed the answer, even as I said those words—but I needed to hear her spell it out, before I could really believe it.

Mendelsohn must have been practicing her version for non-biochemists; she had it down pat. "When people are subject to *stress*—physical or emotional—the levels of certain substances in the bloodstream increase. Cortisol and adrenaline, mainly. Adrenaline has a rapid, short-term effect on the nervous system. Cortisol works on a much longer time frame, modulating all kinds of bodily processes, adapting them for hard times: injury, fatigue, whatever. If the stress is prolonged, someone's cortisol can be elevated for days, or weeks, or months.

"High enough levels of cortisol, in the bloodstream of a pregnant woman, can cross the placental barrier and interact with the hormonal system of the developing fetus. There are parts of the brain where embryonic development is switched into one of two possible pathways, by hormones released by the fetal testes or ovaries. The parts of the brain which control body image, and the parts which control sexual preference. Female embryos usually develop a brain wired with a self-image of a female body, and the strongest potential for sexual attraction toward males. Male embryos, vice versa. And it's the sex hormones in the fetal bloodstream which let the growing neurons *know* the gender of the embryo, and which wiring pattern to adopt.

"Cortisol can interfere with this process. The precise interactions are complex, but the ultimate effect depends on the timing; different parts of the brain are switched into gender-specific versions at different stages of development. So stress at different times during pregnancy leads to different patterns of sexual preference and body image in the child: homosexual, bisexual, transsexual.

"Obviously, a lot depends on the mother's biochemistry. Pregnancy *itself* is stressful—but everyone responds to that differently. The first sign that cortisol might have an effect came in studies in the 1980s, on the children of German women who'd been pregnant during the most intense bombing raids of World War II—when the stress was so great that the effect showed through despite individual differences. In the nineties, researchers thought they'd found a gene which determined male homosexuality . . . but it was always maternally inherited—and it turned out to be influencing *the mother's stress response,* rather than acting directly on the child.

"If maternal cortisol, and other stress hormones, were kept from reaching the fetus . . . then the gender of the brain would always match the gender of the body in every respect. All of the present variation would be wiped out."

I was shaken, but I don't think I let it show. Everything she said rang true; I didn't doubt a word of it. I'd always known that sexual preference

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was decided before birth. I'd known that I was gay, myself, by the age of seven. I'd never sought out the elaborate biological details, though—because I'd never believed that the tedious mechanics of the process could ever matter to me. What turned my blood to ice was not finally learning *the neuroembryology of desire.* The shock was discovering that LEI planned to reach into the womb and take *control* of it.

I pressed on with the questioning in a kind of trance, putting my own feelings into suspended animation.

I said, "LEI's barrier is for filtering out *viruses and toxins.* You're talking about a natural substance which has been present for millions of years—"

"LEI's barrier will keep out everything they deem *non-essential.* The fetus doesn't *need* maternal cortisol in order to survive. If LEI doesn't explicitly include transporters for it, it won't get through. And I'll give you one guess what their plans are."

I said, "You're being paranoid. You think LEI would invest millions of dollars just to take part in a conspiracy to rid the world of homosexuals?"

Mendelsohn looked at me pityingly. "It's not a *conspiracy.* It's a *marketing opportunity.* LEI doesn't give a shit about the sexual politics. They could put in cortisol transporters, and sell the barrier as an anti-viral, anti-drug, anti-pollution screen. Or, they could leave them out, and sell it as all of that—plus a means of guaranteeing a heterosexual child. *Which do you think would earn the most money?*"

That question hit a nerve; I said angrily, "And you had so little faith in people's choice that you *bombed the laboratory* so that no one would ever have the chance to decide?"

Mendelsohn's expression turned stony. "I did *not* bomb LEI. Or irradiate their freezer."

"No? We've traced the cobalt 60 to Federation Centennial."

She looked stunned for a moment, then she said, "Congratulations. Six thousand other people work there, you know. I'm obviously not the only one of them who'd discovered what LEI is up to."

"You're the only one with access to the Biofile vault. What do you expect me to believe? That having learnt about this project, you were going to do absolutely nothing about it?"

"Of course not! And I still plan to publicize what they're doing. Let people know what it will mean. Try to get the issue debated before the product appears in a blaze of misinformation."

"You said you've known about the work for a year."

"Yes—and I've spent most of that time trying to verify all the facts, before opening my big mouth. Nothing would have been stupider than going public with half-baked rumors. I've only told about a dozen people so far, but we were going to launch a big publicity campaign to coincide

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with this year's Mardi Gras. Although now, with the bombing, everything's a thousand times more complicated." She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "But we still have to do what we can, to try to keep the worst from happening."

"The worst?"

"Separatism. Paranoia. Homosexuality redefined as *pathological*. Lesbians and sympathetic straight women looking for their *own* technological means to *guarantee* the survival of the culture . . . while the religious far-right try to prosecute them for *poisoning their babies* . . . with a substance *God's* been happily 'poisoning' babies with for the last few thousand years! Sexual tourists traveling from wealthy countries where the technology is in use, to poorer countries where it isn't."

I was sickened by the vision she was painting—but I pushed on. "These dozen friends of yours—?"

Mendelsohn said dispassionately, "Go fuck yourself. I've got nothing more to say to you. I've told you the truth. I'm not a criminal. And I think you'd better leave."

I went to the bathroom and collected my notepad. In the doorway, I said, "If you're not a criminal, why are you so hard to track down?"

Wordlessly, contemptuously, she lifted her shirt and showed me the bruises below her rib cage—fading, but still an ugly sight. Whoever it was who'd beaten her—an ex-lover?—I could hardly blame her for doing everything she could to avoid a repeat performance.

On the stairs, I hit the REPLAY button on my notepad. The software computed the frequency spectrum for the noise of the running water, subtracted it out of the recording, and then amplified and cleaned up what remained. Every word of our conversation came through crystal clear.

From my car, I phoned a surveillance firm and arranged to have Mendelsohn kept under twenty-four-hour observation.

Halfway home, I stopped in a side street, and sat behind the wheel for ten minutes, unable to think, unable to move.

In bed that night, I asked Martin, "You're left-handed. How would you feel if no one was ever born left-handed again?"

"It wouldn't bother me in the least. Why?"

"You wouldn't think of it as a kind of . . . genocide?"

"Hardly. What's this all about?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"You're shaking."

"I'm cold."

"You don't feel cold to me."

As we made love—tenderly, then savagely—I thought: *This is our*

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language, this is our dialect. Wars have been fought over less. And if this language ever dies out, a people will have vanished from the face of the Earth.

I knew I had to drop the case. If Mendelsohn was guilty, someone else could prove it. To go on working for LEI would destroy me.

Afterward, though . . . that seemed like sentimental bullshit. I belonged to no tribe. Every human being possessed their own sexuality—and when they died, it died with them. If no one was ever born gay again, it made no difference to *me*.

And if I dropped the case *because I was gay*, I'd be abandoning everything I'd ever believed about my own equality, my own identity . . . not to mention giving LEI the chance to announce: *Yes, of course we hired an investigator without regard to sexual preference—but apparently, that was a mistake.*

Staring up into the darkness, I said, "Every time I hear the word *community*, I reach for my revolver."

There was no response; Martin was fast asleep. I wanted to wake him, I wanted to argue it all through, there and then—but I'd signed an agreement, I couldn't tell him a thing.

So I watched him sleep, and tried to convince myself that when the truth came out, he'd understand.

I phoned Janet Lansing, brought her up to date on Mendelsohn—and said coldly, "Why were you so coy? *'Fanatics'? 'Powerful vested interests'?* Are there some words you have trouble pronouncing?"

She'd clearly prepared herself for this moment. "I didn't want to plant my own ideas in your head. Later on, that might have been seen as prejudicial."

"Seen as prejudicial *by whom?*" It was a rhetorical question: the media, of course. By keeping silent on the issue, she'd minimized the risk of being seen to have launched a witch-hunt. Telling me to go look for *homosexual terrorists* might have put LEI in a very unsympathetic light . . . whereas my finding Mendelsohn—for other reasons entirely, despite my ignorance—would come across as proof that the investigation had been conducted without any preconceptions.

I said, "You had your suspicions, and you should have disclosed them. At the very least, you should have told me what the barrier was *for*."

"The barrier," she said, "is for protection against viruses and toxins. But anything we do to the body has side effects. It's not my role to judge whether or not those side effects are acceptable; the regulatory authorities will insist that we publicize *all* of the consequences of using the product—and then the decision will be up to consumers."

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Very neat: the government would twist their arm, "forcing them" to disclose their major selling point!

"And what does your market research tell you?"

"That's strictly confidential."

I very nearly asked her: *When exactly did you find out that I was gay? After you'd hired me—or before?* On the morning of the bombing, while I'd been assembling a dossier on Janet Lansing . . . had *she* been assembling dossiers on all of the people who might have bid for the investigation? And had she found the ultimate PR advantage, the ultimate seal of impartiality, just too tempting to resist?

I didn't ask. I still wanted to believe that it made no difference: she'd hired me, and I'd solve the crime like any other, and nothing else would matter.

I went to the bunker where the cobalt had been stored, at the edge of Federation Centennial's grounds. The trapdoor was solid, but the lock was a joke, and there was no alarm system at all; any smart twelve-year-old could have broken in. Crates full of all kinds of (low-level, short-lived) radioactive waste were stacked up to the ceiling, blocking most of the light from the single bulb; it was no wonder that the theft hadn't been detected sooner. There were even cobwebs—but no mutant spiders, so far as I could see.

After five minutes poking around, listening to my borrowed dosimetry badge adding up the exposure, I was glad to get out . . . whether or not the average chest X-ray would have done ten times more damage. *Hadn't Mendelsohn realized that: how irrational people were about radiation, how much harm it would do her cause once the cobalt was discovered?* Or had her own—fully informed—knowledge of the minimal risks distorted her perception?

The surveillance teams sent me reports daily. It was an expensive service, but LEI was paying. Mendelsohn met her friends openly—telling them all about the night I'd questioned her, warning them in outraged tones that they were almost certainly being watched. They discussed the fetal barrier, the options for—legitimate—opposition, the problems the bombing had caused them. I couldn't tell if the whole thing was being staged for my benefit, or if Mendelsohn was deliberately contacting only those friends who genuinely believed that she hadn't been involved.

I spent most of my time checking the histories of the people she met. I could find no evidence of past violence or sabotage by any of them—let alone experience with high explosives. But then, I hadn't seriously expected to be led straight to the bomber.

All I had was circumstantial evidence. All I could do was gather detail after detail, and hope that the mountain of facts I was assembling would

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eventually reach a critical mass—or that Mendelsohn would slip up, cracking under the pressure.

Weeks passed, and Mendelsohn continued to brazen it out. She even had pamphlets printed, ready to distribute at the Mardi Gras—condemning the bombing as loudly as they condemned LEI for its secrecy.

The nights grew hotter. My temper frayed. I don't know what Martin thought was happening to me, but I had no idea how we were going to survive the impending revelations. I couldn't begin to face up to the magnitude of the backlash there'd be once ATOMIC TERRORISTS met GAY BABY-POISONERS in the daily murdochs—and it would make no difference whether it was Mendelsohn's arrest which broke the news to the public, or her media conference blowing the whistle on LEI and proclaiming her own innocence; either way, the investigation would become a circus. I tried not to think about any of it; it was too late to do anything differently, to drop the case, to tell Martin the truth. So I worked on my tunnel vision.

Elaine scoured the radioactive waste bunker for evidence, but weeks of analysis came up blank. I quizzed the Biofile guards, who (supposedly) would have been watching the whole thing on their monitors when the cobalt was planted, but nobody could recall a client with an unusually large and oddly shaped item, wandering casually into the wrong aisle.

I finally obtained the warrants I needed to scrutinize Mendelsohn's entire electronic history since birth. She'd been arrested exactly once, twenty years before, for kicking an—unprivatized—policeman in the shin, during a protest he'd probably, privately, applauded. The charges had been dropped. She'd had a court order in force for the last eighteen months, restraining a former lover from coming within a kilometer of her home. (The woman was a musician with a band called Tetanus Switchblade; she had two convictions for assault.) There was no evidence of undeclared income, or unusual expenditure. No phone calls to or from known or suspected dealers in arms or explosives, or their known or suspected associates. But everything could have been done with pay phones and cash, if she'd organized it carefully.

Mendelsohn wasn't going to put a foot wrong while I was watching. However careful she'd been, though, she could not have carried out the bombing alone. What I needed was someone venal, nervous, or conscience-stricken enough to turn informant. I put out word on the usual channels: I'd be willing to pay, I'd be willing to bargain.

Six weeks after the bombing, I received an anonymous message by datamail:

Be at the Mardi Gras. No wires, no weapons. I'll find you.
29:17:5:31:23:11

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I played with the numbers for more than an hour, trying to make sense of them, before I finally showed them to Elaine.

She said, "Be careful, James."

"Why?"

"These are the ratios of the six trace elements we found in the residue from the explosion."

Martin spent the day of the Mardi Gras with friends who'd also be in the parade. I sat in my air-conditioned office and tuned in to a TV channel which showed the final preparations, interspersed with talking heads describing the history of the event. In forty years, the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras had been transformed from a series of ugly confrontations with police and local authorities, into a money-spinning spectacle advertised in tourist brochures around the world. It was blessed by every level of government, led by politicians and business identities—and the police, like most professions, now had their own float.

Martin was no transvestite (or muscle-bound leather-fetishist, or any other walking cliché); dressing up in a flamboyant costume, one night a year, was as false, as artificial, for him as it would have been for most heterosexual men. But I think I understood why he did it. He felt guilty that he could "pass for straight" in the clothes he usually wore, with the speech and manner and bearing which came naturally to him. He'd never concealed his sexuality from anyone—but it wasn't instantly apparent to total strangers. For him, taking part in the Mardi Gras was a gesture of solidarity with those gay men who *were* visible, obvious, all year round—and who'd borne the brunt of intolerance because of it.

As dusk fell, spectators began to gather along the route. Helicopters from every news service appeared overhead, turning their cameras on each other to prove to their viewers that this was An Event. Mounted crowd-control personnel—in something very much like the old blue uniform that had vanished when I was a child—parked their horses by the fast-food stands, and stood around fortifying themselves for the long night ahead.

I didn't see how the bomber could seriously expect to find me once I was mingling with a hundred thousand other people—so after leaving the Nexus building, I drove my car around the block slowly, three times, just in case.

By the time I'd made my way to a vantage point, I'd missed the start of the parade; the first thing I saw was a long line of people wearing giant plastic heads bearing the features of famous and infamous queers. (Apparently the word was back in fashion again, officially declared non-perjorative once more, after several years out of favor.) It was all so

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Disney I could have gagged—and yes, there was even Bernadette, the world's first lesbian cartoon mouse. I only recognized three of the humans portrayed—Patrick White, looking haggard and suitably bemused, Joe Orton, leering sardonically, and J. Edgar Hoover, with a Mephistophelian sneer. Everyone wore their names on sashes, though, for what that was worth. A young man beside me asked his girlfriend, "Who the hell was Walt Whitman?"

She shook her head. "No idea. Alan Turing?"

"Search me."

They photographed both of them, anyway.

I wanted to yell at the marchers: *So what? Some queers were famous. Some famous people were queer. What a surprise! Do you think that means you own them?*

I kept silent, of course—while everyone around me cheered and clapped. I wondered how close the bomber was, how long he or she would leave me sweating. Panopticon—the surveillance contractors—were still following Mendelsohn and all of her known associates, most of whom were somewhere along the route of the parade, handing out their pamphlets. None of them appeared to have followed me, though. The bomber was almost certainly someone outside the network of friends we'd uncovered.

An anti-viral, anti-drug, anti-pollution barrier, alone—or a means of guaranteeing a heterosexual child. Which do you think would earn the most money? Surrounded by cheering spectators—half of them mixed-sex couples with children in tow—it was *almost* possible to laugh off Mendelsohn's fears. Who, here, would admit that they'd buy a version of the cocoon which would help wipe out the source of their entertainment? But applauding the freak show didn't mean wanting your own flesh and blood to join it.

An hour after the parade had started, I decided to move out of the densest part of the crowd. If the bomber couldn't reach me through the crush of people, there wasn't much point being here. A hundred or so leather-clad women on—noise-enhanced—electric motorbikes went riding past in a crucifix formation, behind a banner which read DYKES ON BIKES FOR JESUS. I recalled the small group of fundamentalists I'd passed earlier, their backs to the parade route lest they turn into pillars of salt, holding up candles and praying for rain.

I made my way to one of the food stalls, and bought a cold hot dog and a warm orange juice, trying to ignore the smell of horse turds. The place seemed to attract law enforcement types; J. Edgar Hoover himself came wandering by while I was eating, looking like a malevolent Humpty Dumpty.

As he passed me, he said, "Twenty-nine. Seventeen. Five."

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I finished my hot dog and followed him.

He stopped in a deserted side street, behind a supermarket parking lot. As I caught up with him, he took out a magnetic scanner.

I said, "No wires, no weapons." He waved the device over me. I was telling the truth. "Can you talk through that thing?"

"Yes." The giant head bobbed strangely; I couldn't see any eye holes, but he clearly wasn't blind.

"Okay. Where did the explosives come from? We know they started off in Singapore, but who was your supplier here?"

Hoover laughed, deep and muffled. "I'm not going to tell you that. I'd be dead in a week."

"So what *do* you want to tell me?"

"That I only did the grunt work. Mendelsohn organized everything."

"No shit. But what have you got that will prove it? Phone calls? Financial transactions?"

He just laughed again. I was beginning to wonder how many people in the parade would know who'd played J. Edgar Hoover; even if he clammed up now, it was possible that I'd be able to track him down later.

That was when I turned and saw six more, identical, Hoovers coming around the corner. They were all carrying baseball bats.

I started to move. Hoover One drew a pistol and aimed it at my face. He said, "Kneel down slowly, with your hands behind your head."

I did it. He kept the gun on me, and I kept my eyes on the trigger, but I heard the others arrive, and close into a half-circle behind me.

Hoover One said, "Don't you know what happens to traitors? Don't you know what's going to happen to you?"

I shook my head slowly. I didn't know what I could say to appease him, so I spoke the truth. "How can I be a traitor? What is there to betray? Dykes on Bikes for Jesus? The William S. Burroughs Dancers?"

Someone behind me swung their bat into the small of my back. Not as hard as they might have; I lurched forward, but I kept my balance.

Hoover One said, "Don't you know any history, Mr. Pig? Mr. *Polizei?* The Nazis put us in their death camps. The Reaganites tried to have us all die of AIDS. And here you are now, Mr. Pig, working for the fuckers who want to wipe us off the face of the planet. That sounds like betrayal to *me*."

I knelt there, staring at the gun, unable to speak. I couldn't dredge up the words to justify myself. The truth was too difficult, too gray, too confusing. My teeth started chattering. *Nazis. AIDS. Genocide.* Maybe he was right. Maybe I deserved to die.

I felt tears on my cheeks. Hoover One laughed. "Boo hoo, Mr. Pig." Someone swung their bat onto my shoulders. I fell forward on my face,

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too afraid to move my hands to break the fall; I tried to get up, but a boot came down on the back of my neck.

Hoover One bent down and put the gun to my skull. He whispered, "Will you close the case? Lose the evidence on Catherine? You know, your boyfriend frequents some dangerous places; he needs all the friends he can get."

I lifted my face high enough above the asphalt to reply. "Yes."

"Well done, Mr. Pig."

That was when I heard the helicopter.

I blinked the gravel out of my eyes and saw the ground, far brighter than it should have been; there was a spotlight trained on us. I waited for the sound of a bullhorn. Nothing happened. I waited for my assailants to flee. Hoover One took his foot off my neck.

And then they all laid into me with their baseball bats.

I should have curled up and protected my head, but curiosity got the better of me; I turned and stole a glimpse of the chopper. It was a news crew, of course, refusing to do anything unethical like spoil a good story just when it was getting telegenic. That much made perfect sense.

But the goon squad made no sense at all. Why were they sticking around, now that the cameras were running? Just for the pleasure of beating me for a few seconds longer?

Nobody was *that* stupid, that oblivious to PR.

I coughed up two teeth and hid my face again. *They wanted it all to be broadcast.* They *wanted* the headlines, the backlash, the outrage. ATOMIC TERRORISTS! BABY-POISONERS! BRUTAL THUGS!

They wanted to demonize the enemy they were pretending to be.

The Hoovers finally dropped their bats and started running. I lay on the ground drooling blood, too weak to lift my head to see what had driven them away.

A while later, I heard hoofbeats. Someone dropped to the ground beside me and checked my pulse.

I said, "I'm not in pain. I'm happy. I'm delirious."

Then I passed out.

On his second visit, Martin brought Catherine Mendelsohn to the hospital with him. They showed me a recording of LEI's media conference, the day after the Mardi Gras—two hours before Mendelsohn's was scheduled to take place.

Janet Lansing said, "In the light of recent events, we have no choice but to go public. We would have preferred to keep this technology under wraps for commercial reasons, but innocent lives are at stake. And when people turn on their own kind—"

I burst the stitches in my lips laughing.

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LEI had bombed their own laboratory. They'd irradiated their own cells. And they'd hoped that I'd cover up for Mendelsohn, once the evidence led me to her, out of sympathy with her cause. Later, with a tip-off to an investigative reporter or two, the cover-up would have been revealed.

The perfect climate for their product launch.

Since I'd continued with the investigation, though, they'd had to make the best of it: sending in the Hoovers, claiming to be linked to Mendelsohn, to punish me for my diligence.

Mendelsohn said, "Everything LEI leaked about me—the cobalt, my key to the vault—was already spelt out in the pamphlets I'd printed, but that doesn't seem to cut much ice with the murdochs. I'm the Harbor Bridge Gamma Ray Terrorist now."

"You'll never be charged."

"Of course not. So I'll never be found innocent, either."

I said, "When I'm out of here, I'm going after them." *They wanted impartiality? An investigation untainted by prejudice? They'd get exactly what they paid for, this time. Minus the tunnel vision.*

Martin said softly, "Who's going to employ you to do that?"

I smiled, painfully. "LEI's insurance company."

When they'd left, I dozed off.

I woke suddenly, from a dream of suffocation.

Even if I proved that the whole thing had been a marketing exercise by LEI—even if half their directors were thrown in prison, even if the company itself was liquidated—the technology would still be owned by *someone.*

And one way or another, in the end, it would be *sold.*

That's what I'd missed, in my fanatical neutrality: you can't sell a cure without a disease. So even if I was right to be neutral—even if there was no difference to fight for, no difference to betray, no difference to preserve—the best way to *sell* the cocoon would always be to invent one. And even if it would be no tragedy at all if there was nothing left but heterosexuality in a century's time, the only path which could lead there would be one of lies, and wounding, and vilification.

Would people buy that, or not?

I was suddenly very much afraid that they would. ●

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BIG BOOM

Joe Haldeman

I think it comes and goes... tick tick boom
about ten thousand million years ago
there wasn't any space there wasn't any room
time did not exist nothing could die or grow

about ten thousand million years ago
God woke up looked around complained
"Time does not exist. Nothing can die, or grow,
or have any place to be. This is insane."

God looked up walked around contained
in one small point He walked he didn't
have any place to be he went insane
and pushed the button Boom! it all began

in one small point he worked he didn't
sleep for six whole days each a zillion years
then push the button boom it all begins
again it works like this all your fears

about scientists are true chaos reigns
it takes about ten thousand million years
to evolve a jerk who can build a machine
to recreate the Big Bang with no fear

like a clock every ten thousand million years
some jerk pushes the button boom RESET
you have a new place to be one small point
everything is chaos everything's destroyed

because some Jerk pushed the button relax
it will all come around again it all would just give room
to entropy otherwise face the simple facts
you know it comes and goes... tick tick boom

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Greg Costikyan recently completed a new novel, *One Quest, Hold the Dragons.* It is a sequel to his earlier book, *Another Day, Another Dungeon,* which was published by Tor and the Science Fiction Book Club in 1990. A third volume in the "Cups & Sorcery" series is anticipated. Mr. Costikyan assures us that "he is not now, nor has he ever been, a member of the Communist Party or any other organization devoted to the forcible overthrow of the American government." Still, that hasn't stopped him from fashioning a chilling look at why...

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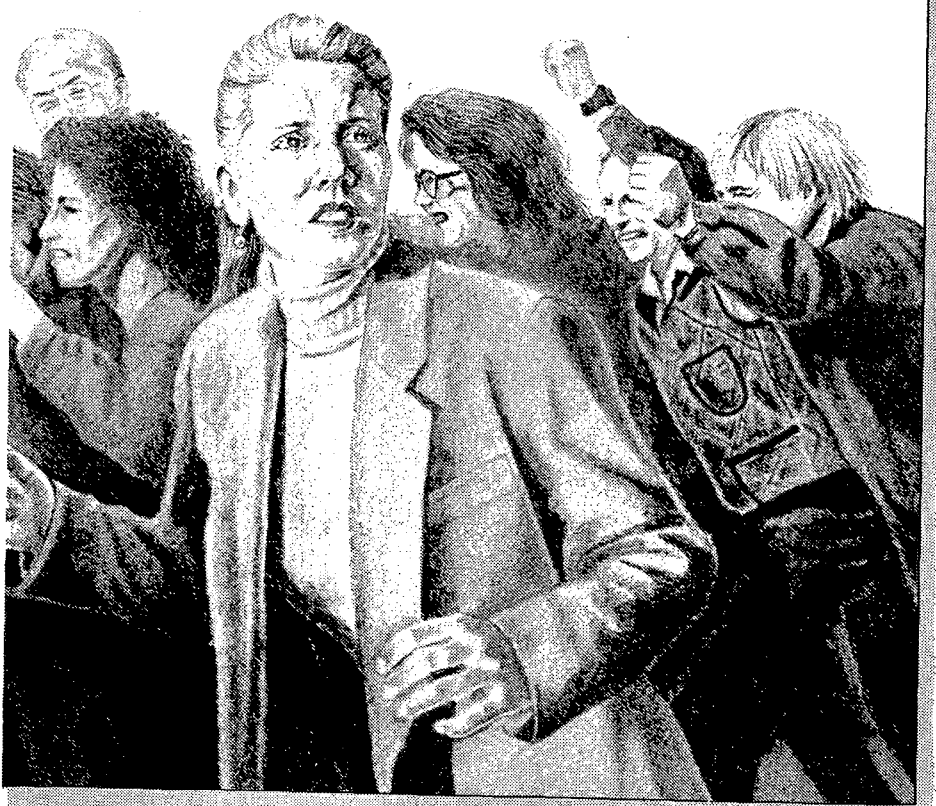
THE WEST IS RED

Greg Costikyan

art: Steve Cavallo



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"Parlor pink," I said.

I didn't have much time; the door was unlocked, and people might wander in at any moment. The bar in the ballroom of the Chinese embassy was swamped; apparently, people hadn't discovered this bar yet, which gave me a chance to test the robot behind it. It puzzled me.

One, two, three. . . . There was a time delay before the bartender swung into action. Its brain was in Moscow, or possibly Beijing; but why so long a delay? It mixed me the cocktail: cranberry juice, dark Cuban rum, seltzer, twist of lime. Devilish clever, these Chinese.

I sidled around the bar. The electronics were in a box held closed by small hex screws. The tools I use to maintain my terminal were in my purse; I had the cover off in seconds. I pulled out a breadboard. Several black chips said РБГ 16И; standard memory chips, probably bought from the Proletarian Electronics plant outside Vladivostok. Sixteen megs a piece; they had cost someone a pretty kopek. What I wanted to know was, how did it communicate with Beijing? There were no obvious cables, but the U.S. had no cellular phone system yet, and . . .

There, that was a radio transmitter. It occurred to me that the Chinese embassy must have a satellite link; that explained the delay. It takes a quarter second or so to bounce data off a satellite; it would take less time to route communications over cable, but America's rickety phone system probably wasn't up to the task.

The door to the room opened. I cursed, crouching behind the bar. I was not entirely comfortable, not in high heels.

"Hello?" said someone in English. I kept down. He muttered something, then made his way to the bartender. "Scotch on the—hello. I thought I saw you come in here." It was that American; handsome fellow. He'd been eying me from across the party.

There I was, on the floor behind the bar, electronics spread out around me. Stupid, stupid; I shouldn't have let curiosity get the better of me. I started shoving things back into the bartender.

"Bloody hell," I said. "I hadn't expected you to follow me."

"Why'd you wink at me, then?" he said.

"Why not?" I said. "Boring party."

"Getting in a little industrial espionage before they serve dinner?"

"Really, no," I said, screwing the plate back onto the box. "Scotch on the rocks," I said experimentally; one, two—the thing seemed to work okay. "That is what you wanted?"

"Yeah," he said, taking the drink.

"I was just curious," I said. "The Chinese are very clever about commercial use of electronics, you know; ahead of us in many ways."

"Sure," he said. "You Russkis spent too much time building killer satellites, and not enough time building color TVs. I'm Frank Mangiara."

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"I can read," I said, a little irritably; that's what his nametag said, of course. I glanced behind the bar; no, there didn't seem to be any evidence of my tinkering. I straightened my stockings. Thankfully, Mangiara seemed more interested in my legs than my, um, extralegal activities.

"Look, let's get back to the party before Sam here starts spraying us with vodka, okay?" I said.

"Okay," said Mangiara, and held the door for me.

The noise of the ballroom was a shock. I waved at Ambassador Wan, who waved back. He was drunk, weaving a bit on his feet, and getting drunker by the minute; I had no doubt he was regaling the Americans clustered about him with yet another interminable story about the Long March. I wondered how I was going to ditch Mangiara. Then, I wondered whether I wanted to; the party looked like it was getting duller by the moment.

"I've never met an academician before," Mangiara said, shouting over the mob. He was reading my nametag, of course: Academician Nazarian, that's me. A fully-vested member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Really.

"You're a Marxist?" Mangiara asked.

"Isn't everyone?" I said, snagging a dumpling from a passing waiter. "But no," I said. "Marxism isn't my science. I work with the Big Brain."

"You're in computers?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Why are you in Washington, then? Isn't Moscow the place to be?"

I shrugged. "Fraternal Soviet assistance to aid America in its difficult transition to the modern socialist order," I said. "Central planners need accurate, timely data to manage an economy efficiently—can't have central planning without central processing. Your computers need help. I'm supposed to bring them up to snuff."

"We're decades behind, I suppose," said Mangiara dolorously.

"Of course," I said. "Look, Frank, I'm bored out of my skull. What say we paint the town red?"

He gave me a sudden grin. "I think I can find some drop cloths and brushes."

"Lead on, MacDuff," said I.

Mangiara unlocked a nifty little Great Wall roadster, bucket seats and gull-wing doors. It had government plates—well, of course. Mangiara had to have something to do with the U.S. government, or he wouldn't be attending a party at the Chinese embassy.

"How did you wangle this?" I asked, as we slid into the sparse Washington traffic.

"Hmm?"

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"Doesn't the U.S. government require its functionaries to drive American cars?"

He gave me a boyish grin. "Those rattletraps?" he said. "I've got a friend in the dispatcher's office. Let them stick someone else with those two-stroke Chevies."

"What do you do, anyway?"

Mangiara spoke absently, concentrating on driving. "Department of Transportation," he said. "Something to do with choo-choo trains. Pretty dull, really."

Well, if even he thought it was dull, I wasn't too interested in talking about it.

Washington was more attractive by night than by day; darkness hid the coal-smoke grime, the despairing faces, the stoop-shouldered men and women clad in badly tailored clothes. As we neared Pennsylvania Avenue, the traffic thickened. Mangiara grunted. "Oops," he said. "Forgot about that."

"About what?"

He pointed through the windshield. At the end of the block, past the motionless cars that blocked our way, were flickering torches. "Demo tonight," he said.

"Who is it?" I said.

"Republicans," he said

I shivered—fascists. They still had enough influence in the Supreme Court and Senate to block reforms. From time to time, the police would halt the marchers long enough to let a few cars across the street.

"I'm sorry," said Mangiara. "If I'd remembered, I could have taken a different route. We'll just have to wait."

"*Nichevo,*" I told him.

After some time, we reached the end of the block. A very nervous policeman held up a hand to stop us, then waved the marchers past.

They bore burning brands in the darkness, American flags and eagles, portraits of the tyrant Nixon, signs demanding, "No More Nationalizations!" and "Live Free or Die" and "Death to Radey"—the senator from California, the first member of the CP/USA to be elected to federal office. Many of them were in uniform. Breath puffed white in the cold winter air.

They looked angry; the policemen lining the street, in their riot garb, looked a little scared.

I don't know what set them off; a thrown rock, a curse, rabble-rousing, provocation by the police . . . it hardly matters. Any demonstration is a tinderbox. Suddenly, the marchers were running and shouting. The police line was in motion, tear gas swirled across the avenue. Mangiara swiftly shut the vent on the car's heater, to avoid sucking in the gas.

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One man, a hefty blue-collar type, began pounding on the hood of Mangiara's Chinese car, shouting "Buy American!"

"For shame!" I shouted at him. "Where's your international working-class solidarity!"

"Please," Mangiara moaned.

The worker turned puce, found an uprooted No-Parking sign, and bashed at the windshield. Cracks spread across the glass, but it held. Mangiara backed up and floored the accelerator; the worker dodged out of the way, only just in time. We drove hesitantly across the street, marchers stumbling into the side of the car as they fled, unable to see for the roiling, noisome gas.

We finally made it across the road. Mangiara sped down the street, getting away from the demo as fast as he could. "Well," he said, "not exactly the start to the evening I had planned."

"Actually, I quite enjoyed it," I said.

He gave me a startled glance.

"Invigorating," I said.

He looked somewhat bemused.

"I'm sorry about your windshield," I said.

"Well," he said, "there are advantages to being part of the motor pool."

We sped down darkened streets, past sleeping bums and hopeless faces, to an area I would have hesitated to visit, unescorted. He led me down a flight of stairs to a basement cabaret.

The lights were low, the room inevitably smoke-filled—the American health authorities have worse things to worry about than smoking. The clientele, to my startlement, was at least half Negro; I had been few places in America where the races mixed freely. At the stage was a jazz band. They were absolutely first rate.

Mangiara ordered us ribs and an American whisky, and we listened attentively.

After a while, the band took a break. "I'm surprised there are places like this in America," I said.

"Not too many," he said. "Jazz doesn't get the audience here it does in Europe; but not too many Negroes have the price of a ticket to Paris, you know."

The next set began, and the ribs came soon after. Mangiara showed me how to eat them: with the fingers, gnawing the meat off the bones, a primitive, somehow satisfying practice. His leg was against mine, under the table.

When we were finished, Mangiara said, "Well, it's getting late."

"You disappoint me, *tovarishch,*" I said. "This is your idea of a town painted red?"

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He gave me a lopsided smile. He had a nice dimple. "You don't have to work tomorrow?"

"More to the point," I said, "I *can't* work tomorrow."

"Why not?"

I sighed. "The bloody Pentagon won't let me in to take a look at Univac."

"Someone should tell them the Cold War is over."

"That would be nice."

"Still," he said, "they *did* spend fifty years making sure no Reds ever got close to the thing."

"Yes, yes, understandable," I said, "but it's damned debilitating. I didn't come to the U.S. to loaf."

He nodded philosophically, and caught the waitress's eye. He made scribbling motions with his hands. "Feel like dancing?" The waitress brought the check.

"Definitely *da*," I said.

"Cité d'Espace," it said in neon; didn't look like *my* idea of a space station. It had once been a warehouse, all bare brick walls and industrial piping, glittering lights and loud music. The clientele was what passed for the spoiled children of the American elite, teenagers and post-teens clad in tight mylar and European fashions. The headline act was a third-rate German techno band—I imagined the U.S. didn't get first rate talent—followed by local groups. I was puzzled by the French name—techno originated in Berlin, and its stars are still mainly German—until I recalled the depths of American bitterness at West Germany's withdrawal from NATO and its reunification under a communist regime, the act that precipitated the end to the Western alliance.

Mangiara got me a drink laced with something, and we spent some time on the floor. I enjoyed myself.

Afterward we hit a little pâtisserie for Napoleons and coffee; had a drink in the bar at one of Washington's better hotels, where a piano player sang tunes from old Brecht-Weill musical comedies; and wound up at a rather seedy club that featured vaudeville.

"There's life in America after all," I told Mangiara, happily exhausted, as we sped onward, apparently through the country north of Washington. We'd been so many places, I didn't bother to ask where we were headed; it didn't seem to matter.

"This is nothing," he said. "You should see New York."

"I'd love to," I said.

We arrived at a clapboard house somewhere in Maryland, overlooking a valley filled with crisp, white snow, several miles off the main road. Mangiara told me it belonged to a friend.

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He built a fire in the hearth and made the featherbed, piling it high with patchwork quilts. We made love there, for the first time, sinking deep into the mattress' down, amid geometric patterns and the smell of woodsmoke and camphor, a winter wind whistling past the windows and rattling the panes.

A few days later the Pentagon finally gave in, and I was admitted to work on what had been America's deepest military secret. I found myself frantic with activity, working around the clock, sometimes, down there in the bowels of the Pentagon, peering at amber screens under blue fluorescent lights. Actually, it made a pleasant change from sitting around twiddling my thumbs and cursing the military mentality. I'd been looking for a challenge; well, trying to bash the antiquated U.S. computer system into something like modern utility was a challenge of the first order.

I didn't have much time for Mangiara; he took it hard, the poor sod. Whenever I got back to my room at the embassy, there were always little plaintive messages awaiting me. I took pity on him, and we went out several times, but I could tell he was chafing. He wanted more.

But I was determined not to take the relationship too seriously; long-distance romances rarely work out, I knew. Hadn't Irina fallen for the actor—Mischa, was that his name? He had moved to Vladivostok, to join the Soviet cinema on the booming Pacific Coast, and though they had tried to carry on the romance, by phone and electronic mail and supersonic jet, they had gradually drifted away. How much less likely a long-term romance with an American seemed; certainly, I had no intention of staying in Washington forever.

One night, Mangiara asked, "Can I see my rival?"

"Your what?" I said.

"Univac," he said.

"You think of the machine as your rival?"

"Well, you spend more time with it than with me."

I had to laugh. "You're a better conversationalist," I said, "a lot handsomer, and much better in bed. You have nothing to fear."

Mangiara drifted off to sleep; I studied his face affectionately. Still, I told him silently, my work is my life; you don't become an academician by thirty without dedication. You are an amusement, my dear, my handsome American. If you and Univac are rivals, Univac, too, has nothing to fear.

"Strip," I told Mangiara.

He looked uneasily around, at the bare, white walls, the smell of antiseptic rising from the tiled floor. "You want to screw here?"

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"No, pretty boy," I said. "You can't go in to see Univac dressed like that."

He looked down at his charcoal suit. "My tie crooked?" he asked.

I sighed. "Don't be obtuse. Even a mote of dust can endanger the circuitry, get into the drives; we operate under clean-room conditions. Out of those clothes, and into the shower."

He insisted on privacy, which I found rather funny; not like I hadn't seen him in the buff. He met me by the airlock in the uniform of the computer professional: lab smock, hair cap, disposable paper booties over the shoes. We cycled the airlock.

"Is this really necessary?" he asked.

"Yup. The chamber's at positive pressure, to prevent dust infiltration."

The lock's inner door opened onto the elevator. We took it down, down, for long moments.

"Must be a long way down," said Mangiara.

"It's supposed to be able to withstand a direct nuclear hit," I said. "Getting Univac was top priority for the Strategic Rocket Forces, you know."

The elevator opened with a clang. We left for the metal catwalk. Mangiara peered over the railing and down into the Well. Down it stretched, dozens of levels. On each, corridors led off past metal frames holding circuit boards and cables. Lab-coated technicians scurried everywhere, pulling defective boards and replacing them, testing connections, running diagnostics. Against the far wall were the tape and disk drives, bank after bank, alert lights blinking, tape reels whirring away. The whole place thrummed with the air-conditioning, the whirring drives, the fans cooling individual peripherals. It was a cavern, a man-made cavern, the largest man-made structure, by volume, in the world, or so I'd been told—the Big Brain's chamber was smaller, but then, Soviet electronics are more highly miniaturized. I couldn't imagine what the Well had cost, to blast out from the bedrock underneath Washington.

"My God," said Mangiara.

"No reactionary sentiments here, please," I said. "Credit human genius, not some infantile father-myth."

"Just a figure of speech," he muttered. "What is it all *for?*"

I led the way down the walk, shoes clanging against the grating. I pulled a circuit board—multiple redundancy meant I'd do no harm. "Looks like any electronic device," Mangiara said.

"Sure," I said. "Just a breadboard, capacitors and resistors; these big black ones are memory chips. Individually, nothing much; put them together, and it's the second most powerful processor in the solar system."

"These are all memory chips?"

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I shrugged. "Memory chips, modulator/demodulators for phone connections, peripheral control devices. Univac's the second most complicated machine ever conceived by the human mind; I'm not sure any single person could tell you what everything in the Well does."

"What's the most complicated—never mind. The Big Brain in Moscow, I assume."

I nodded.

Mangiara shivered. "This is where the FBI keeps its files."

"All the U.S. military and quasi-military agencies. Come on."

We took the elevator several levels down. Mangiara looked a little drawn. We found a terminal, and I signed on.

"Here's your credit record," I said, pulling it up. I studied it for a moment; "Pretty clean."

Mangiara grunted. "Anyone can do that?"

"No," I said. "But I am a big cheese here, you know. I can do just about anything short of shutting Univac down."

"This kind of thing could be abused," he said.

I sighed. "The people's state does not abuse the people's trust."

"Tell that to Stalin," he said.

"A transitional stage to true socialism. And, hum, here's your FBI dossier."

Mangiara turned white, and put his hand over the screen.

"Don't be silly, Frank," I said. "I could read it any time."

"Promise me you won't," he said.

I shrugged. "If you like," I said. But I did later, of course—well, wouldn't you? Dear Frank had a homosexual fling during college, it seems. Fairly petty, as mortal secrets go.

"Is the Big Brain much larger?" Mangiara asked.

I fluttered my hand: *comme ci, comme ça.* "Two orders of magnitude or so."

"A factor of a hundred?" Frank said, sounding impressed.

"Not so much, really," I said. "Two generations of technology; you're at most a decade behind us. And Univac would be larger if it weren't for the civilian machine in Boston, you know; it was foolish for your government to build a separate civilian processor."

He shrugged. "It would have endangered military security to use Univac for civilian ends," he said. "Besides, what's the big deal?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I said. "It all comes down to cost per operation; two separate processors are more than double the expense of one large one. A large one can time-share tasks, and therefore is always busy; small ones spend many cycles idle. And there are economies in programming, in data consistency, in maintenance, in manufacture."

"I see," said Mangiara thoughtfully. "It's like central planning."

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I blinked at him. "What?"

"Competing firms duplicate effort; centralization is always efficient. Smoothly increasing economies of scale. Central planners can gather and process information more efficiently than scattered, individual businessmen; a central computer does the same."

"Smoothly increasing economies of scale, yes," I said slowly. "I hadn't seen the parallel, before."

The American government was like a weathervane, twisting this way and that as public opinion moved in its random, Brownian way. President Jackson kept on trying to find a nonexistent "third way" between socialism and the market; the economy continued its decline. I'd been admitted to Univac during one of the warmer moments in U.S./Soviet relations; then, things got chillier again. The military started forcing me to clear every change to Univac's software; and that meant endless, time-wasting obstruction. Work was increasingly frustrating; and so, I began to spend more time with Mangiara.

I wasn't getting much sleep; too many late nights. I found myself napping on the job between compiles. The constant white noise of the air conditioning was annoyingly soothing. I think some of my co-workers caught me asleep, but were too much in awe of the august Soviet academician to make anything of it.

One night, as Frank was drifting off to sleep, he used the L word.

And I found myself wakeful. I did, I realized, feel an inordinate fondness for him. "You'll know when you're in love," my mother had always said; a blatant lie. A damned slippery thing, love. But I realized I could no longer dismiss our relationship as a fling.

One day, Frank called me at work. "Do you still want to see New York?" he asked.

"You bet," I said.

"I've wangled an assignment there," he said. "Actually it's one I think you can help me with."

He explained.

"Okay," I said. "I'll bring my terminal. Tell them to secure a line to Moscow, and keep it open for our arrival." With America's rickety telephone system, I knew, it might take hours to obtain a connection to the Big Brain otherwise.

Frank got us a private car on the train—"Being in the Department does have its perquisites," he said, somewhat apologetically. I shrugged; might as well take advantage of such bourgeois pleasures while they lasted. It was plush, mahogany and velvet, Negro attendants in crisp white coats, champagne in silver buckets.

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It was amazing how much of the land between Washington and New York was unpeopled; forests and fields stretching on forever, pale green now with the first growth of spring. America's poverty, the rarity of cars, had at least spared it the curse of suburban sprawl.

Pennsylvania Station was a rococo Gothic structure, obviously decades old, grimy, like every building in coal-burning America, but quite charming, in its way. That was another thing, it occurred to me, America had been spared through its poverty; in the Soviet Union, we had lost so many similar grand old structures, torn down in the name of progress.

The offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad Corporation—how absurdly romantic a name, how amazing that so archaic a thing as a limited liability corporation should still exist!—were in the building, in a warren of offices above the main chamber. We were quickly ushered into the president's office.

It was quite as grand as one might expect; the portrait of some great robber baron, white-haired and mustachioed, several times larger than life, glared down on the desk of his successor. Oriental carpets swept across hardwood floors; the desk itself looked as if it could accommodate a regiment.

"Mr. Mangiara," said the president, rising from a leather armchair. He was balding, in his fifties, clad in a Savile Row suit with collar so tight that flesh bulged out above it. "And—Madame Nazarian, I take it?"

I shook his hand. "Academician Nazarian," I said. "Or 'comrade' will do."

The president's eyebrows danced. "I'll refrain from 'comrade,' if you will," he said. "The Engineers' Union would about die laughing, if they heard me calling anyone 'comrade.' Mr. Mangiara says you have a demonstration for me?"

"Is the line to Moscow open?"

He turned to a secretary, who sat by the desk with a telephone. She nodded. I went to the phone, took my terminal out of its case, set it up on the desk, and wired the modulator/demodulator into the phone.

"What is this device?" asked the president.

"A remote terminal," I said absently, as I signed onto the Brain.

"Chinese, I assume?" the president said.

I nodded; the best terminals were still made in the Soviet Union, but the Chinese made perfectly adequate ones. Colored pictures unfurled on the screen.

"Before I start," I said, "I'd like to ask a few questions."

"Certainly," said the president, taking a seat facing the screen.

"On average, what portion of your freight containers are idle?"

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He blinked. "At any given time, roughly 40 percent of the total."

I nodded. "And if you have, say, two carloads of steel waiting at Red Hook, one bound for Allentown and another for Newark, how do you determine when they get picked up and how they get switched to the right trains?"

He shook his head. "I've got a corps of engineers sitting downstairs with calculators, bashing keys like mad in an effort to figure that out. Figuring how to switch loads around efficiently is the key to profitability, and it's no trivial task."

"You don't use a computer?" Frank asked.

"My good man," said the president. "We are not the government. The Penn may be a profitable road, but we can't afford aircraft carriers, lunar probes, or computers."

"Good," I said. "Here's the Soviet rail net; I'm centering on Moscow."

On the screen appeared a square, a hundred kilometers on a side. Rail lines in blue, moving trains in red. By various stations were blinking lights. I clicked on a light; up sprang a window. "Chimki station," I read. "Three loads grain, one of goods from the Red Star Consumer Electronics factory in Yaroslavl. Let's look at that." I clicked on it; up sprang another window. "Slated for pickup by the fast freight from Leningrad at 06:12 hours; switched at Moscow for the 08:48 to Baku; and then . . ."

"My God," said the president, staring at the screen entranced. "Can I change it, send it to Berlin, say?"

"You could if you were in the Ministry of Transport," I said. "I'm not authorized to do that."

"You can see the whole net?"

I clicked; the screen showed the whole Union, trunk lines in red, width of each line showing the volume of freight in transit at the moment. They pulsed slowly over time. I clicked in on the Pacific coast, Vladivostok and its burgeoning suburbs, the busy lines over the Amur and into thriving China.

"This is an amazing toy," said the president. "But what's the point?"

"This lets you monitor the rail net," I said, "but the net is operated, of course, by the Brain—every switch, every station, every connection. Total container utilization is . . ." I clacked at the keyboard briefly, "93.4 percent at the moment." The final digit flickered up and down; random fluctuations, really, carloads being switched across the whole Soviet network.

"That's impossible," the president said flatly.

"Not at all," I said. "You are trying to solve complex transit-time equations on mechanical calculators; it is absurd. The Big Brain can perform quadrillions of operations a second, more by the day as we add

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capacity. Optimizing the rail net uses a tiny fraction of its processing time. You could never afford the computing power yourself."

He grunted. "We still won't if we're nationalized," he pointed out.

"No," I said, "but even if Univac is a decade behind the Big Brain in technology, it can do a far better job than people punching buttons."

"Univac—is that possible?" he said, turning to Frank.

Frank nodded. "Of course," he said. "With the Cold War over, it's being turned to civilian use."

The president mulled that over for a moment. "And if, say, the Feds nationalize the Erie road and the New York Central, Univac will optimize their operations. If the Penn stays independent, we—we'll lose our shirts. We'll be out-competed."

"You must not think in those terms," I said. "It is not competition. It is planning. Separate companies duplicate effort; competition itself wastes resources."

To my surprise, he almost snarled at me. "Competition is the American way," he said intensely. "We're a nation built on individualism. Change France from a monarchy to a republic to socialism, it stays France. But what is America without individual rights, without capitalism?"

"We're going to have to find out," Frank said gently. "There is no alternative. The verdict of history is in, and it says: Central planning works. Capitalism doesn't."

The president took a ragged breath. "I don't have a choice, do I?" he said bitterly. "Either we accept nationalization, or we'll be run into the ground."

Frank sighed. "No," he said reluctantly, "there's no point in running the Pennsylvania Railroad into the ground. If we have to, we'll nationalize it forcibly. But we'd rather have management's cooperation."

The president stared at that looming portrait on the wall for a long time. At last, he said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you to leave. I have a great deal to discuss with the board, and with my subordinates."

I loved New York.

The contrast with Washington was stark. Here, healthy unions, powerful local government, and a strong civil-service ethic had done their best to create local socialism even under the capitalist government that savaged the rest of the nation. The results were everywhere, in the hopeful faces of children departing the city's excellent public schools, in the gleaming corridors of its municipal hospital system, in the pristine streets, even in the tiny, by American standards, rate of crime.

Oh, the city wasn't spared America's misery entirely; there were homeless everywhere, but at least here they were served by the city's first-rate welfare system. And the lack of economic opportunity meant the

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products of the city's superb educational system were, more often than not, forced to emigrate to find work that befitted their skills. By American standards, the city was well off, but by the standards of the socialist world, it was still quite poor.

Still, even that poverty had a charm. Here, there were the shabby bars, the small neighborhoods with strong sense of community, the comfortable blue-collar feeling I remembered from the Moscow of my youth—a Moscow now much altered by yuppification.

And though New York lagged far behind London as a capital of the Anglophone world's intellectual life, here there was Broadway, publishing, the remnants of America's film industry in flight from collapsing California, first rate restaurants and museums. It was enormous fun, visiting New York, as a Soviet; with the ruble so strong and the dollar so weak, everything cost practically nothing at all.

It was wonderful seeing the Matisses at the Museum of Modern Art; so many masterpieces had been locked away behind the Iron Curtain for so many years. We hit Broadway every night, seeing things by obscure local playwrights like Neil Simon and George Lucas, as well as the usual Lloyd Webber and Brecht-Weill standards. We browsed for hours in the myriad used bookstores on Fourth Avenue, lunched at the sidewalk cafes among the glitter of Times Square, and even chartered a boat to tour the harbor and the sadly decayed ruins of the Statue of Liberty.

And we ate our way across the city, from Lutèce to sidewalk hot dog carts, from Sweets at the Fulton Fish Market to Sylvia's in Harlem.

On Thursday night, we rode the subway to Astoria, in Queens. The train moved swiftly, silently under the river.

"Amazing that you have such good subways, but can't build a decent car," I told Frank.

He shrugged. "The city has run the subways for decades," he said. "One of the few planned institutions in a largely chaotic economy."

The Astoria station, in recognition of the ethnic background of the region's inhabitants, was decorated in Greek fashion: Corinthian columns, murals in patterns copied from ancient vases, wide marble steps leading upward.

We walked through busy streets, where children played stickball until their mothers called them in to dinner, to what Frank claimed was the best Greek restaurant in America.

Certainly the bouzouki music was joyful enough; Frank ordered us drinks, pointedly avoiding the retsina. As we waited for the calamari, he said, "I had an idea the other day."

"Is that unusual?" I asked.

"Thank you very much, Academician," he said. "There's a brain behind

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this pretty face, you know. I was thinking: what if centralized information processing were inefficient?"

"Say what?"

He spread his hands. "It's easy enough to devise a rationale," he said. "Let's suppose that information is best handled locally, that centralizing it simply overloads the people at the top with too much data. Suppose that individual managers, familiar with the problems they face every day, make better decisions than remote managers at headquarters. Suppose that competition works the way the old classical economists thought, to drive down prices and drive out the inefficient; that government monopoly is no better than private. . . ."

"You mean, suppose capitalism works better than Marxism," I said. "Patently, it doesn't. You can't set up controlled experiments in economics, but you can look at what happened in the past, and everything since the end of the Great Patriotic War says socialism is the better way."

"Elementary, my dear Engels," he said. "But just suppose. America would have won the Cold War."

"Ah!" I said. "This is an exercise in alternate history. But you're varying natural law, rather than a particular historical event. Interesting. Germany would unify under the Federal Republic, Britain would be an economic laggard instead of a powerhouse, the population of the Soviet Pacific would still be under a million. . . ."

"And that of California would approach thirty million," he said. "Los Angeles, not Vladivostok, would be the film capital of the world."

"Let's not get carried away," I said. "China would be a backwater, and —why not?—Japan the great economic success story of the century."

"Who's getting carried away now?" he said. "What about computers?"

I blinked. "What about them?"

"If local managers work better than central planners, then won't small computers work better than a big central one?"

"You mean, distributed processing would work better than time-sharing," I mused. "The cost-per-MIPS curve would be the opposite of our world; little machines would prevail. There'd be a computer for every company, perhaps several—"

"Or one per person," said Frank.

"Per person?" I said. "That's absurd; a computer on every desk? The average person's bookkeeping needs are pretty minor. What would people use them for?"

"Who knows?" he said. "We don't know what software people would devise for such machines, because we haven't had the need or opportunity."

"The mind boggles," I said. The calamari came, and we ate for a while. "Well," I said, "thank Marx your world is mere fantasy."

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"Why?" Frank asked.

"Would you really want capitalism to win out over socialism? The poor ignored, the environment raped, everyone living under a constant barrage of commercial blandishment? I realize times are hard, in the West, but it is all for the best."

Frank said, "Some people aren't too happy that civil liberties must be sacrificed to progress."

I waved my fork. "Can't be helped," I said. "There can be no right to property, because property is theft; no right to free speech, if that means promulgating lies."

We left the subway at Columbus Circle, detouring through Central Park on our way back to the Plaza. We walked hand in hand past fragrant forsythia. The park was almost crowded, other late-night strollers taking in the soft spring air. We passed a policeman, twirling his nightstick as he walked his beat; he beamed at us. "All the world loves lovers," Frank whispered, nuzzling my ear.

"Frank," I said, "have you given any thought to what we'll do when my stint here ends?"

"I've tried not to," he said, kissing a line down my neck.

"Stop it," I said. "I'm serious."

"I'm sure you could get a job here," Frank said. "There's no one in the country who knows what you know."

"No doubt," I said. "But I don't think I could stand Washington for very long."

"What about New York?"

"Better," I admitted. "But I have a career back home, you know. You'd like Moscow, Frank."

Frank scratched an ear. "What could I do there?" he said. "I don't have any particular technical skills, I don't speak the language. . . ."

"At least you'd be a citizen," I said.

There was a pause. "Nadia," he said. "I do believe you've just proposed."

I blinked; I guess I had.

"Ex-tree!" a newsboy shouted. "Airborne occupies Capitol! Reeeeedal-labouuuuit!"

The coup had begun.

"I've got to get back to Washington," Frank said.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

"No! Absolutely not. You must go to the Soviet embassy here." There was one in New York, of course, representing the USSR to the United Nations.

"Why shouldn't I come?" I demanded.

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"You don't know what will happen," he said grimly. "This might be over tomorrow, or it might be the beginning of a civil war. Either way, Soviet citizens are going to be at risk."

"It's not like I'm KGB," I protested. "I'm just a scientist. Why would—"

"You'll be safer here in New York, and safer still at the embassy. Why would you want to go to Washington, anyway? They won't let you in the Pentagon, you know; you won't be able to do any work."

"I didn't come to America to be safe," I said. "If that's what I wanted, I would have stayed in Moscow."

"This isn't a game, Nadia!" Frank said. "They kill people!"

I had no argument for that; there were at least a dozen dead, in the coup's first hours.

"I'll stay if you stay," I said.

Frank hesitated; "I—I can't," he said.

"Why not?"

He sighed, and said, somewhat self-deprecatingly, "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country."

I grew alarmed. "What the hell does that mean? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said, spreading hands. "Maybe nothing; maybe there's nothing to be done. But if they get away with this, it's back into the deep freeze, America digging itself a deeper grave. Do you think Radey will just cave in? And what about the president? I can't imagine the junta has his support."

"I see," I said. "You want the little woman safe so you can go off and play at revolution. The phrase 'sexist pig' springs to mind."

He gave me a lop-sided smile. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Stuff it," I said.

We'd still be arguing, there in our room at the Plaza, if I hadn't beaten a tactical retreat. I let him go, letting him think I'd decamp to the embassy. I intended to follow him, on the next available train.

As I was packing, I got a call from Ambassador Vassilikov.

"Academician," he said, "good. I'm glad we caught you still in New York."

"Yes, Ambassador," I said. "What is it?"

"The Soviet government has issued an advisory, urging all Soviet citizens either to leave the country or seek asylum at the embassy. I suggest you go to the embassy in New York; I've informed Ambassador Chernikov that you'll be coming, and they—"

"Thank you for your concern, Ambassador," I said, "but I intend to return to Washington, to witness these historic events first hand."

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There was silence on the line, for a while. "Academician," Vassilikov said, "you are a highly educated woman. The government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has invested hundreds of thousands of rubles in your skills."

"And what of it?" I said.

"We have no intention of risking that investment. I am authorized to order you to go to the embassy."

I felt a chill. He had not actually issued the order; if he did, it would become a permanent blot on my record.

"I understand, Ambassador."

"You will go?"

"No."

"Academician Nazarian," he said. "You do not have the right to defy the state. Your duty is to serve the people, not to act on whim."

He was absolutely in the right; there is no place for—for individual liberty, as Frank would have called it—in the socialist order. I was privileged by intelligence and education, and by my very privilege, compelled to serve. I was unable to respond.

"Academician," the ambassador said, "I *am* ordering you to go to the embassy. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Will you comply?"

"No," I said.

I put the receiver down, feeling sick.

There went my career.

Union Station had become the nerve center of the resistance; Senator Radey ate and slept there, surrounded by half the Congress and a substantial part of Washington's population, rallying in resistance to the fascist regime. From across the country, people came by rail to join them, sleeping in the surrounding streets despite the chill April air. It was a precarious time; not a mile distant, the junta's troops guarded the Capitol and the White House. Among the communists, there were only light weapons; a few rifles, rather more handguns. If the fascists chose to attack, the resistance could be crushed in an afternoon.

But the junta seemed paralyzed, unable to move. They were seemingly surprised at the strength of the resistance; perhaps they had expected general support. Certainly, President Jackson and his half-hearted reforms enjoyed no great popularity; but the junta had misread the nature of the people's discontent. There was no desire for a return to the days of the military-industrial complex, no nostalgia for nuclear terror and gradual decline. To most people, the communist program still seemed too radical; but there was even less support for a military regime.

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They might have succeeded, if Jackson had come out in their support; but he remained silent, a prisoner at Camp David.

Frank was furious when he learned I was there. But I was determined to stay.

My skills even came in handy; I had my terminal, and dialed into Univac. The military was divided; indeed, shortly after I arrived, several tanks from the 7th Cavalry arrived, and took up stations protecting the station. Perhaps Univac's system operators sympathized with the resistance; perhaps, in the confusion, the junta had merely neglected to order restrictions on public access to Univac.

Whatever the case, with my account's privileges, it was a simple matter to hack into the files that recorded the junta's orders and troop movements. We could see what they were doing, virtually as they began to do it.

And we made good use of our intelligence; no doubt, you've seen the footage, people lying down in front of tanks to prevent their entry into Washington, our people haranguing the advancing troops and, not infrequently, persuading them to defect.

It was a tense, glorious time, marred only by the growing rift between Frank and me.

On the afternoon of April 10, Radey decided it was time to make a move. You've seen that speech, I suppose, the senator clambering onto a tank to harangue the crowd—no doubt the most famous image of the April Revolution.

No, the second most famous one.

After the speech, he led the way down Constitution Avenue. Frank was at the van; I had wanted to march with him, but he pointedly refused, insisting I stay at Union Station.

I was not about to do that. Still, we were widely separated in the order of march.

We skirted the troops surrounding the Capitol, and headed west down the Mall, past the brown towers of the Smithsonian. They say a hundred thousand people marched that day; I believe it. It was a sea of humanity, moving across the green, the vast Mall carpeted with human forms.

At the Washington Monument, we turned right, walking through the needle's shadow. We crossed Constitution Avenue again, and walked across the Ellipse—directly toward the White House gate. I could glimpse it only in snatches, through the crowd ahead; I might be fool enough to be here, thought I, but I was not such a fool as to be at the front of what might quickly become a disaster.

At the center of the gate was a Patton tank; and behind the iron

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fence surrounding the White House were armed soldiers of the 101st, defending what had become the junta's headquarters.

"Halt!" shouted a soldier through a megaphone. "We have orders to defend this gate."

Radey shouted something in response; so far back, I did not hear what he said. Later, I learned he had asked if they would fire on fellow Americans.

There was silence for a moment. Then, "We have our orders," said the soldier.

The crowd was motionless for a long moment. And then, it began to move forward again. Heart in throat, I moved with it.

There are moments frozen in time, instants that can be remembered with perfect clarity. The sky was achingly blue above, the sun bright, still high but moving toward the west. Though the crowd had chanted during the march, now it was curiously silent, the red banners audibly flapping, the soft sound of thousands of feet walking across grass. The breeze was cool, from the southwest, bearing the sweet scent of cherry blossoms from the trees around the Tidal Basin; indeed, the trees were already beginning to shed their petals, and little motes of pink skittered across the grass, driven by the freshening breeze. That breeze was cool on the skin; though the sun was warm, it was April still. Though the human world might be in turmoil, the natural world was calm, serene. So much for Shakespeare.

Those at the front neared the iron bars. It began to appear that the soldiers' threat was a bluff; they seemed almost visibly to dither, unprepared to face such massive defiance. . . .

And then, the quiet was shattered by a submachinegun's staccato rap.

The crowd gave almost an animal roar; and while there might be confusion at the front of the mob, the rest surged forward. The iron fence gave way, falling before massed bodies. . . .

And another gun rang out; another and another, explosion after explosion rattling all across the line, panicked soldiers firing wildly into the mob, the noise punctuated by the tank cannon's boom.

If there are moments that are frozen in time, so there are moments that are shattered into a thousand jangling images. People screaming, fleeing in all directions; blood spraying across space, wounded dragging themselves desperately away, the slow or unwary trampled under foot, grass churned to mud, screams of terror and moans of agony. I fell and was trod upon, but suffered no worse than bruises. I fled, I don't know why, down through West Potomac Park.

Encroaching night found me squatting under Lincoln's massive feet, shivering more from remembered terror than the cold.

At last, I rose and walked to the Soviet embassy on 16th. A jeepful of

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soldiers sped past me on the way, but apparently decided tha haggard woman violating curfew was not worth bothering.

Seven hundred people died that day; the casualties were in th sands. The following morning, the TV showed helicopter footage Ellipse and the White House lawn, bodies still lying everywhere, gouges in the turf where tanks had passed.

A thin tendril of smoke rose from the East Wing, which the demons tors had set afire; but the flames had soon been suppressed.

I called Frank's number again and again, but there was no reply.

It was days before I learned: Frank was among the dead. He had take a bullet in the gut, and had bled to death there on the lawn. Washington's ambulance corps had, with few exceptions, been too craven to rescue the wounded. With help, he might have lived.

The storming of the White House was, they say, the turning point, the moment when the junta realized the scantiness of its support, when public opinion crystalized against them. When President Jackson was released, he condemned them thoroughly, and that was the coup's end

And I; well, the state has forgiven me. Ambassador Vassilikov wept when he learned about Frank; he muttered something about "the Slavic soul," and told me that love is sufficient reason to defy the state—an unorthodox opinion. "I shall remove any mention of the incident from your record," he said, "if you agree to tell your story for publication." And so I shall.

My sojourn in America has descended by degrees, from high spirits to agony; if life in Moscow was missing something, if it was too smooth, too easy, well, the lack has been remedied, to excess. I am looking forward to return.

But I am not wholly in despair.

America has years of desolation to endure, and possibly rivers of blood still to shed; even in Western Europe, the transition to socialism has proven more difficult than expected, and here, the market's last bastion, it will be more difficult still.

I never saw Frank's corpse, not until it rested, features composed, in a coffin; but I have an image of it lying there on the White House lawn, atop the black cast-iron bars of the fallen fence, blank eyes staring wildly, blood pooling on the ground. The sun shines, the sky is blue, the breeze scatters pink cherry blossoms across the unknowing form. The Japanese who gave those trees would understand, I think; how very Oriental, to see beauty in death.

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idn't die in vain. The red flags rise across America. The specter
r oblivion haunts the world no longer; socialism's triumph prom-
tter life for all. Beyond these times of trouble, we can glimpse a
f peace, and prosperity.
larx foretold, the victory of the proletariat is foreordained. But oh,
e who suffer, ground in history's inexorable wheels.
d yet, and yet, it is all worthwhile.
he West is Red; and Frank Mangiara's blood helped to dye it so. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have an exciting, jam-packed June issue in store for you next month, one that will shuttle you through time from the distant past to the turbulent future, into strange realms and stranger dimensions, and far across the Galaxy to sinister alien worlds.

James Patrick Kelly takes us deep into a bizarre future and introduces us to one of its strangest inhabitants, the formidable "Big Guy"; hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum** explores the almost unbridgeable gulfs between one world and another, and between one human soul and another, in a poignant new novella that tells the story of "The Mermaid's Comb"; Nebula-and Hugo-winner **Terry Bisson** takes us out for a wild ride that includes a hair-raising, unforgettable spin around "Dead Man's Curve"; exciting new British hard-science writer **Stephen Baxter** delves into "The Logic Pool," one of the most frightening and downright strange environments you're ever likely to see in science fiction, and comes out with a story that's right on the Cutting Edge of today's scientific speculation! **Steven Utley** returns with a bittersweet look at the events of "One Kansas Night"; **Steven Popkes** immerses us in an enigmatic alien society on a distant alien planet, as an expatriate Earthman struggles to unravel a deadly mystery in "Whistle in the Dark"; and new writer **Maggie Flinn** regales us with a wry and tasty entertainment called "On Dreams: A Love Story." Plus an array of columns and features.

Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstands on April 26, 1994.

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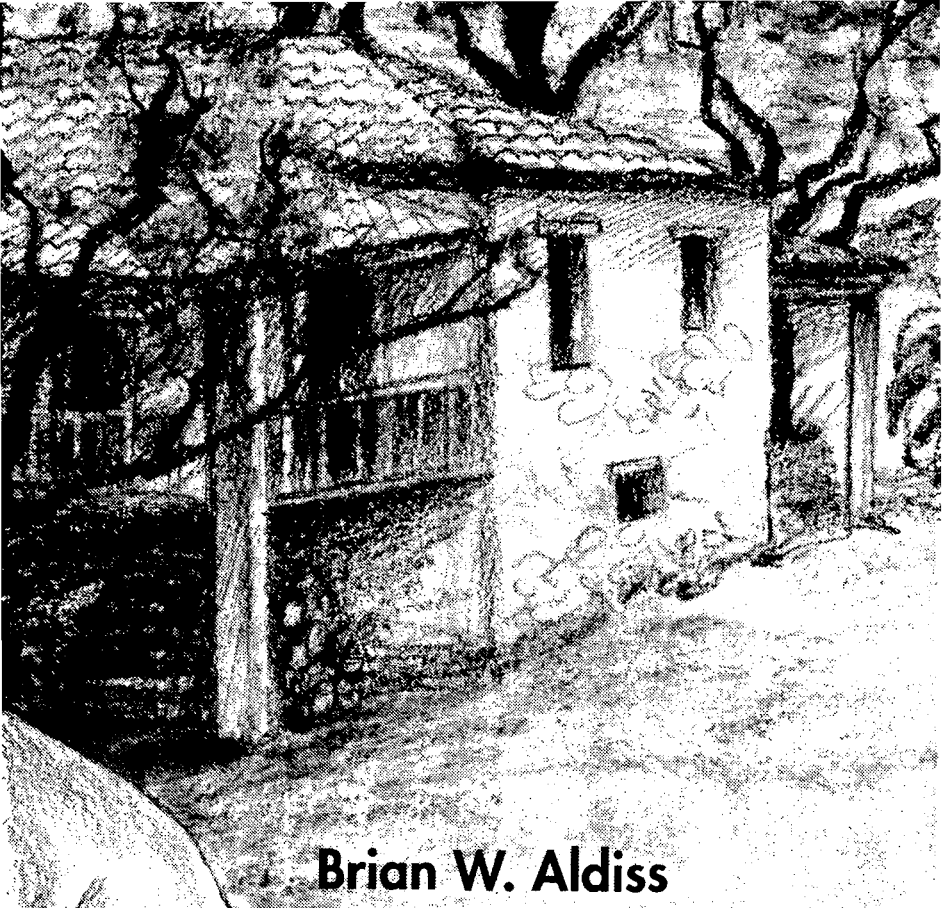

Brian W. Aldiss

THE GOD WHO SLEPT WITH WOMEN

The distinguished Hugo- and Nebula-award winning author Brian W. Aldiss returns to our pages after far too long an absence. Mr. Aldiss' last story for *Asimov's*, "The Difficulties Involved in Photographing Nix Olympica," appeared in our May 1986 issue. His most recent novel, *Remembrance Day*, was published by St. Martin's Press last July. His next book, *Somewhere East of Life*, will be out from Carroll & Graf later this year.

art: Laurie Harden

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Elizabeth said: *"I know I'm only an ignorant peasant woman. However rich we become, a peasant woman I'll remain. But I've heeded the tales old women still tell in the village, when they sit out on their steps in the evening light. The first gods were female. That's true, girls. The first gods were female. I'm talking about long ago, you understand. Women had all the power then. Childbirth was a mystery. What the learned call copulation and I call fucking was not connected in people's minds with childbearing.*

"This was at the beginning of the world. People were simple in those days, my dear daughters. Men had no importance because the link between what they've got between their legs and begetting children was not understood. So the myths began, those stories that explain the world. Do you know, women were supernatural beings? It was believed that rivers and winds impregnated the wombs of women. People lived happily enough under that illusion, I suppose. They must have made love just as folk do now. We all live under illusions still, that we know. Whatever Father Nikolaos says in church, we still don't know what makes the world tick.

"Once everyone found out what really happened with fucking and all that, and how men had a use after all, their standing improved. Men became mad with their new power. That must be when male gods first arrived. One god was supposed to have created everything—the universe and all the beings in it. Just to take away women's power from them.

"Gods are tricky things, and so are men. They always think they know better. So just beware, now you're growing up, my dear daughters."

The four girls smiled like cats with saucers of cream, and said nothing. They loved their mother, but of course they knew better than she did.

"I had a golden dream last night," said Elena, resting her elbow on the breakfast table and her chin in her hand. "It was wonderful and it lasted all night through. You see. . . ."

But there she paused, to look into the faces of her sisters. The girls were sitting barefoot on their verandah in the early morning sun. For breakfast they ate bread with honey and yoghurt. Today there was no school. They lingered over coffee while their mother scurried about in the house, preparing to leave for work in the fields.

The eyes of the sisters were grey or deep blue, like the Aegean which could be seen from the windows of the small house. The house had been built by Elena's grandfather; small and whitewashed, it had stood amid its little garden for almost fifty years. And last night something like a great wind, and yet something more than a great wind, had visited it.

"Well now, what was this 'golden dream'?" asked Persephone, the bold sister (who would later dream she went to Australia).

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Still Elena hesitated. She had realized that her dream, so beautiful in its unfolding, might seem indelicate in its telling.

"I bet it was all about a man, eh?" said Artemis, the naughty sister (who would later dream she ran a husband and a hat shop in Athens).

Elena sucked her spoon and looked from one sister to another. She felt a blush starting in the roots of her black hair and spreading to her cheeks. Now that she had embarked on the subject, she hardly knew how to continue.

"You don't have to tell us, Elena, darling, if it's private," said Rea, the shy sister (who would later dream she made an unfortunate marriage).

"Oh, yes, she does," said Persephone.

"What happened was," said Elena, and then paused before going on in a rush, "a god came to my bed in the shape of a golden whirlwind."

Before she could say more, her sisters broke into peals of laughter, covering their open mouths politely with their hands as they did so. "Golden whirlwind!" they repeated, and hooted with laughter. "Golden whirlwind!" and rocked with laughter.

They joked all through the morning. They were still teasing Elena in the evening, when their mother returned from work. Elizabeth put an arm about Elena, smiled good-naturedly, and quietened her daughters down. Elizabeth Papoulias never joked. The girls sometimes teased her in a high-spirited way. Elizabeth would merely laugh by way of response.

Elizabeth's laughter always touched Elena; she felt that she alone among the sisters understood her mother's sorrow. Now she was sad herself, to have her beautiful and inexplicable dream mocked.

Hard outside work had made Elizabeth's hands hard, but her manner to her daughters was invariably gentle. Some grey hairs already streaked her dark hair. She had ceased to look in her mirror. Now Elizabeth took her youngest daughter aside and advised her in her low, serious voice. "Elena, your sisters do not understand. You must not be upset by them. You believe your dream happened, so it happened. The world's stranger than people think."

"It was not really a dream, mother."

"That I understand. I was awake in the night, as I always am."

Elena looked inquiringly at her mother, waiting for her to continue.

"I heard you cry out for pleasure, Elena."

Elena looked down at the floor in embarassment, not saying a word. In her delight, had she not cried out more than once?

"Our entire house was bathed in gold, Elena, for a whole hour. Such light as never was before. It's a great wonder, my dearest."

Elizabeth stood in the small room that served as kitchen and living room. In one corner was the television set, in another, Yannis, their caged linnet. She went over to speak to the bird when her daughter left the room.

Yannis cocked his head on one side as if understanding what Elizabeth

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had to say. What Elizabeth had to say was not very articulate. The linnet answered with a clear fluting burst of song.

"Oh, Yannis, we keep you imprisoned," said Elizabeth. "I love you dearly, yet I keep you in this little cage. . . . Forgive me. Life is a prison for humans too. I fear for Elena's future. . . ."

She was in one of her bad moods, when everything looked black. So often she longed to have a man to turn to for advice.

She carried the cage out into the fresh spring air, to hang it from a hook on the verandah, in the shade, where Yannis might watch birds that were free.

Elena, meanwhile, had slipped out of the house without her sisters knowing. They were prattling on the back porch, among the oleanders and the chickens. She walked down through the olive trees to the margins of the sea, feeling herself invaded by a new sense of loneliness.

The waters of the Saronic Gulf stretched before her, in color between deep blue and purple. Waves turned lazily over on the shingle at the girl's feet. Distant islands showed grey, crowned by white cloud. As always when she stood here, gazing into distance, Elena wondered if her father would ever return. She had to pretend to herself she remembered his face, smiling down at her.

Looking back, she could make out the red-tiled roof of her home among the olive branches. She loved the house in which she had been born, and the way in which it was now occupied solely by women. But when she had expressed that love to her mother, and remarked on how kind grandfather had been to leave it to Elizabeth, her mother had not replied; instead, her face became set. And Elena remembered hearing from an old woman in the village that her grandfather had been a cruel and drunken man. Angry at siring no sons, he had beaten and abused his poor daughter.

She slipped off her shoes and walked among the little wet stones, letting an occasional wave break over her feet. Her gaze was lowered in thought. A gull cried out as it passed overhead, wings outspread.

Elena remembered how often her mother said, looking up at a passing gull, "Oh, that I were as free as that bird!" The remark brought sorrow to Elena's heart: not only because the sentiment revealed her mother's discontent, but because she knew, as Elizabeth did not, that even the birds were governed by stern laws of hunger and territoriality. A conviction overcame her—by no means for the first time—that human life, and the great life of the universe, was other than adults preferred to believe it was.

The sheer mystery of the world gave her somber pleasure. It was the pleasure which cut her off from her three sisters.

A clump of yellow sea poppy grew amid the old square stones. The stones had the texture of biscuit. They marked a spot where once had stood a temple, ancient before Christ was born. Something glinted in the grey sand piled up around the stones. Elena stooped, dug in the sand, and pulled up a glittering thing from its place of semi-concealment.

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The high wind in the night had caused waves to lash against the remains of the venerable building. What the storm had partially uncovered was a collar or parure made of gold. Elena held up the collar in astonishment, allowing it to gleam in the sunlight. When she had rinsed the sand from it, she saw it was both beautiful and ancient, whole and complete.

Elizabeth was more excited than her daughters. She and Elena caught a ferry and ventured to Athens. They took the precious find to an expert at the Athens Archaeological Museum. The expert, after consultation, pronounced the parure to be of Byzantine workmanship, gold, and of rare design, probably dating from the tenth century. A museum in Berlin was anxious to acquire it. Before too many weeks had passed, a sum of money which Elizabeth—not to mention her four astonished daughters—regarded as immense was paid over to her. From then onward, Elizabeth no longer had to toil in the fields, and could pay to have her children educated in foreign languages.

"Elena was always lucky," said her sisters, not knowing then just how lucky.

Elizabeth Papoulias knew that what had happened to her youngest daughter was no dream, no idle thing. Her lovely Elena, born only a month after her ne'er-do-well husband had left her, was deeply precious to her: her empathy for the child caused her to believe she knew Elena's feelings better than did the girl herself. Deeply superstitious, brought up with the stories of the old gods and goddesses with their impetuous ways, she believed that Elena was favored by the arbitrary rulers of the universe.

This understanding she had always hugged to herself, saying no word of it to her children, even to Elena, in case someone became jealous. But families understand what is unspoken better than words from the mouth.

When the immense sum of money arrived from Berlin, Elizabeth found herself more in control of her life, and the lives of those who were her responsibility. She hoped above all to spare them from the kind of prison of circumstance in which she felt she existed. So she took a walk down to the kiosk in the village and phoned her sister Sophia, who lived in Piraeus.

Sophia had married a doctor, and was now Mrs. Sophia Houdris, wife of Dr. Constandine Houdris. Consequently, she over-dressed, visited hairdressing saloons frequently, and patronized her less fortunate sister. On the phone, however, Sophia was geniality itself, Elena's fabulous discovery having evidently had a beneficial effect on her temperament. It was agreed that the doctor would examine Elena privately.

One morning in late spring, Elizabeth kept Elena away from school and caught the ferry to Piraeus with her. Rea, Artemis, and Persephone were not as envious as might be imagined, since they were rather afraid of their overbearing Aunt Sophia, with her fine city manners.

Mother and daughter arrived at the tall narrow house in Anakous

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Street, to be greeted affectionately by Sophia and given a good late lunch, with plates of the sweet cakes to which Sophia was addicted. Elena was subdued; she was frightened by the noise and business of the streets of Piraeus, and oppressed by what she regarded as the over-furnished rooms where her aunt and uncle lived. So she said hardly a word while the two sisters talked away, Sophia smoking cigarette after cigarette meanwhile. They walked softly; the doctor was seeing patients in his surgery immediately below.

A linnet hopped about in a cage on Sophia's first floor balcony. It resembled Yannis, but would not sing for Elena.

"So how do you feel? You don't look ill, girl. Well, let's get it over with. Take your clothes off. Yes, yes, all of them. Don't be shy. Don't delay, there's a good girl. I have an important patient coming to see me at 4:30. Tell me about your periods."

Uncle Constandine Houdris was in some respects a fine-looking man. He had superficially a resemblance to a good old Greek sailor, with a complicated wrinkled visage, a noble brow, and a huge white moustache. He was, however, very pale, rather stooped, and nervous in his manner. He rarely left the apartment on Anakous Street, wore eyeglasses of a pink tint, and smoked heavily, even when examining his patients.

Elena was embarrassed to stand naked before him. Dr. Houdris stubbed out his cigarette and regarded her young body appreciatively.

"I'm supposed to have a nurse here for these examinations, but since you're family we'll save a drachma or two," he said, coming closer and beginning to feel his niece lingeringly. "Mm, mm. . . . What sign were you born under? Mm, mm. . . .

"Very nice, my dear. You're well-developed for thirteen. Still a virgin, eh? No village boys got at you yet?"

She said in a whisper, "Uncle, something came to me in the middle of the night. Two months ago. Not of my asking."

He nodded. "Not a village boy? It entered you, though? Your hymen's intact. Still. . . . There seems to be something inside that neat little belly of yours. We'll take an X-ray. So what was this 'something' that came to you in the middle of the night? Your mother seems excited about it all."

"Mother thinks it was a god." She brought out the last word with an effort.

He peered nearsightedly at Elena, and for the first time allowed some sympathy to pervade his tone.

"And what do you think, Elena?"

"I think it was a god."

As he positioned her on the X-ray machine, he said, "You realize this is probably a delusion? Young girls often suffer from delusions. Well, so do old men, come to that. . . . Hold still now. . . . At times you'd think that *everything* was a delusion."

The X-rays showed that it was no delusion. Elena had within her body—well, baffling though it was, the plate showed clearly that a small

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god nestled snugly there. It was no fetus. Rather, as far as could be seen, it was bearded and, moreover, wore a Grecian-type helmet of the sort reproduced so often for foreign tourists to buy in the souvenir shops of Plaka.

Sophia and Elizabeth were called down to the surgery to see the X-rays. They were dumbfounded and clucked like old hens, saying repeatedly that they couldn't believe it.

"But when will it be born, uncle?" Elena asked, almost in tears.

Her uncle put his arm round her shoulders. "How did the geni get in the bottle? That's the medical question. . . ."

"Oh, drat the medical question, uncle! What am I to do?"

Dr. Houdris removed his pink spectacles from his face and stared up at the ceiling.

"There must be some way we can make money out of this, my girl. As long as that little man sleeps on in there—"

"Little man! Why, it's a *god,* Constandine!" exclaimed Elizabeth, daring to contradict her brother-in-law. "And I'm certainly not putting Elena on display, if you have any such idea in your head. She's very special, is my Elena. I've always known it, and this proves it."

How special Elena was, they had yet to find out. Elena and her mother took the ferry back across the Saronic Gulf, and tried to live as before. Houdris and his wife, however, were more ambitious.

It happened that one of Houdris's patients was an upward mobile man in the lower circles of the ruling political party, a party which both the doctor and his wife supported. The doctor confided to this young man that he had an extraordinary niece who was apparently about to become a unique example of virgin birth. By his calculations, the child, her extraordinary child, would be born some time late in December.

Although the young man had not risen sufficiently in his profession to have the ear of the Prime Minister, he certainly had the ear of the Minister for the Environment. The Minister for the Environment was a distant relation of his, a cousin-twice-removed. As soon as he got the chance, he told the story of Elena, with suitable embellishments, to this Minister. The Minister laughed and said merely that he did not think a second Virgin Mary was in the cards. However, after he had paid the bill for his young relation's drinks, he thought about the matter.

Ever since her husband had left her, Elizabeth had suffered from insomnia. The excitement brought on by the news of Elena's god made sleep even harder to come by. She rose one morning before dawn, left a note for her sleeping daughters telling them to get their own breakfasts and be sure to wash properly, and set off to catch a boat.

The spirit, she told herself, moved her.

It was a Friday. And on Fridays during the summer a ferry sailing among the islands called in at the nearest port, only four kilometers beyond the village. Elizabeth caught the ferry with five minutes to spare.

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She sat on deck, watching the ever-changing pattern of islands and sea, bathed in the pure light of another day. She rejoiced. She felt elevated. What had happened was—she hardly dared use the word, even to herself—a miracle. She lived in a miraculous world.

The understanding gave her a new power; she felt it within her, as if she herself was carrying a god in her womb. Looking back at the wake of the vessel, she saw it as a path she herself was making across the world. She sang under her breath, matching the song to the steady rhythm of the ship's engines.

When the ferry pulled into the harbor of the island of Aegina, Elizabeth disembarked amid a small knot of village people, local holiday-makers, and foreign tourists. Aegina was all a-bustle, even at this pristine hour. She ignored the attractions of its shops and hired a taxi to take her inland, up to the ruined temple of Aphaia.

The great temple, built in the heyday of Aegean culture some centuries before Christ, stood proudly on a hill. Worshippers here could gaze at an unrivaled panorama—Elizabeth had been taught Sappho's words—

Over the salt sea
and over the richly flowered fields

At this hour, the temple stood solitary on its eminence, except for a melancholy Oriental tourist with a pack on his back. He sat clutching his camera, gazing out to where light and distance concealed Kithnos and the isles of the Cyclades. He had no glance to spare for Elizabeth or she for him.

Her mother had brought little Elizabeth here once, on her name day, when she was six years old. She had never forgotten her shock at the sight of her mother abandoning the habits of church and throwing herself down on the worn stones to pray to the elusive goddess, Aphaia, whoever she might be.

Perhaps humans should not know the gods by name.

Elizabeth's mother had prayed for the happiness of her child. Now Elizabeth prostrated herself much as her mother had done, over thirty years earlier. The stones beneath her knees, her arms, were still chilly from the night. Like her mother, she prayed for the happiness of her daughters, and for Elena especially. And for whatever was about to happen to them. . . .

The prayer faded into a meditation as she abased herself under the Doric columns. Women must have come to pray at this sacred spot over many generations. Yet she knew nothing of them. She knew only of her own mother, her own daughters. So ignorant was she, that all the rest might be pure invention, something cooked up by priests or the educated.

Was this visitation of the god to Elena perhaps also a message to her? Suppose the whole universe was about to be reinvented. . . . Her youngest daughter was not too young to bear a child, just as she, Lizzie Papoulias, was not too old to bear another one, if required. Of this she felt certain: that some wonderful process had started, which would overturn everything that now was. Tears of joy squeezed their way from her closed eyes.

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She must help the wonderful thing to happen. She alone, possibly with the interference of her sister and brother-in-law. Perhaps it was for this the gods had arranged that her husband should desert her.

Speculation faded into prayer again as she stirred on the hard blocks of chiseled stone. She prayed that she would be unafraid in the face of powers she could never comprehend.

When she stood up, tourists were arriving at the temple, cheerful in their colorful clothing. Elizabeth avoided them and went down to the souvenir shop for an orange juice.

The Minister of the Environment was an easygoing man. He was not deeply moved by the plight of the environment, being fond of telling his friends that it was, after all, the deforestation of Attica which had built Athenian triremes which had brought democracy to Europe and the West. So, he ended with a laugh, deforestation must be good for us all.

What the Minister needed just at present was money. He had taken on an expensive mistress who liked to shop in Paris and New York. It occurred to him that the story of little Elena Papoulias, as told to him by his cousin-twice-removed, might be helpful to his overdraft. Surely the Prime Minister would like the sound of having a second Virgin Mary born on his home ground. . . . The Pope would be furious, all eyes would be turned on Greece.

He knew how superstitious the Prime Minster was; and of course the government was at that time undergoing a financial crisis and losing general support. It would by no means harm his career if he offered the P.M. a distraction to bolster his popularity.

The next formal committee meeting was a stormy one. The P.M., against the advice of most of the cabinet, had decided to launch another national lottery, to be called the Youth Lottery. The prizes for the Youth Lottery would be suitably grand, while the proceeds would go toward improved school accommodation. The new buildings would eventually replace the present rather haphazard methods of education, particularly in rural areas and on the islands.

During the meeting, the Minister for the Environment slipped away and phoned his young relation. The young relation phoned Dr. Constandine Houdris. Dr. Houdris gave some details of Elena's schooling and how, during term time, she and her sisters had to walk a kilometer to catch a bus which took them to a village where they got a ferry to a large town in which their school was situated. This journey had to be made in reverse order after class. In winter, when storms swept the Saronic Gulf, the ferries often could not run. This information was relayed back to the Minister for the Environment.

The Minister had previously been lukewarm about the Youth Lottery. Now he became more enthusiastic, tackling the P.M. after the meeting and drinking some champagne with him.

"I can think of an ideal young person who might stand for all the young people who will benefit from your splendid lottery, Prime Minister," he

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said. "An imaginative symbol. An outstanding and I believe very attractive representative of Greek girlhood." And he proceeded to explain about Elena Papoulias.

"What?" said the P.M. "She's pregnant? Thirteen and pregnant and you wish me to use her as a symbol of Greek girlhood? You're mad, Stavros! Go away. Leave me in peace. Do something about the traffic in Athens."

The bill for the Youth Lottery was passed through parliament before the summer recess. The first monthly draw was to be held in November. Everywhere went the publicity for the lottery, and the P.M.'s popularity rose accordingly.

The month of November was wet. The four Papoulias sisters attended school as usual. Elizabeth went to church on Sunday as was her custom. She was a little afraid of the young priest, with his glossy black beard and proud bearing; the old priest, Father Nikolaos, rather dotty now, had been more to her taste. The young priest had made a disparaging remark about Elena's pregnancy, to Elizabeth's annoyance.

That pregnancy—though Elizabeth never used the word—had advanced no further. Elena gave no sign of oncoming parturition and indeed had grown accustomed to the god sleeping inside her.

As Elizabeth left the little white-washed church that November morning, she was surprised to see the old priest, Father Nikolaos, standing under a pine tree nearby. He beckoned Elizabeth over.

"Father, how are you? How's the arthritis? I've really been meaning to visit you."

"Of course, of course. It is a bit of a problem. And your sons are well?"

"Daughters, father."

The old man nodded his head vigorously. "Daughters I meant to say. I hear tell the youngest has a little god inside her, is that right?"

Elizabeth ventured to put a hand on the old man's arm. "Father, you will think it blasphemy that we call it a god. But there's something in there that doesn't want to come out, and the X-rays show it to be of human shape. And it wears a little helmet."

"A helmet, you say? A helmet? Then it must be a god. Many wonderful things happen, my child, and who am I to deny it?" He paused. The rain was coming on again. "All will go well with you and yours as long as that little god keeps on sleeping inside your son. He'll protect you from harm and bring good fortune—to you as well as your sons."

"Daughters, Father. You shouldn't stay out in this rain."

"Daughters I meant to say. Excuse me. There's something I had to tell you. . . . Now what was it?"

"About Elena?"

"Oh yes. No. No, I don't think so."

She was getting wet and feeling she needed to go home and sit down and sip some camomile tea. "It's not about Costas, is it?" Costas was her missing husband.

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"Ah, yes. Costas. . . . Poor fellow! Unable to tell right from wrong."

"Don't pity him, Father. Pity me who ever crossed paths with the man. What's your news?"

Father Nikolaos had a brother in Australia. Over the years, and intermittently, the brother had sent home news of emigrant Greeks to his priest brother. Some years previously, maybe two, maybe three, he had enclosed a clipping from a newspaper in his letter. The clipping was a brief news item reporting that Costas Papoulias, thirty-six, had been up for trial for rape and manslaughter before a court in Sydney. The court had sentenced him to a long prison term. Privately, Elizabeth was relieved to know that this violent man—every bit as bad as her own father—had been shut away in a distant land. Not wishing her daughters to feel ashamed, she had never told them that their father was a convict in an Australian jail.

"What's the news, Father?" she asked again, as the old priest looked up at her, narrowing his eyes as if trying to sum her up.

"He's hopped it, my dear. Escaped from prison."

The old man knew nothing more than that. The Australian newspaper had simply reported the bare fact. Elizabeth walked home through the drizzle in a thoughtful mood. She made herself a cup of camomile tea and settled down on her sofa under a rug, relieved that her daughters were off with friends, amusing themselves. Yannis sang to her, but she did not hear; she could only think that Costas might come back to Greece and seek her out. He would come straight to the house. The nightmare life would resume. . . .

But if the gods had ordained it. . . .

Next day, when the girls were at school, an official-looking letter arrived, addressed to Elena. Elizabeth immediately connected it with her husband. Wrongly, as it turned out. When Elena returned and opened the letter, she discovered that she had won the very first draw of the Youth Lottery. Millions of drachmae were hers.

Elizabeth had bought five tickets, one for each of her daughters and one for herself. And Elena was the lucky one. A second fortune had come her way.

She thought of Father Nikolaos's words: The god will bring you good luck as long as he goes on sleeping inside Elena. But if he woke up? She trembled from the force of her fear.

Innocent and pliant, Elena declared herself delighted by her amazing luck. Privately, she wished only that life would continue as it was, if possible for ever. It was her sisters who seemed to yearn for change.

"Lend me some money, and when I leave school I'll fly to America and be a movie star," said Persephone (who would later dream she went to Australia).

"Buy me a red motorcycle like my friend Tomis," begged Artemis (who would later dream she ran a husband and hat shop in Athens.)

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"Do you think we could afford a video now?" asked Rea (who would later dream she made an unfortunate marriage).

Elena said she would see about it. First of all, she had to go to Athens. There, she would receive her lottery prize and shake hands with the Prime Minister before the television cameras. Then, she said to herself, she would return home, bringing each of her sisters a present, with a special present for her mother, and probably something for her history teacher, a young man for whom she had tender feelings. She felt that the little god in her stomach approved of her intentions; perhaps he even masterminded them.

In the silence of the crowded bedroom, when her sisters were asleep, she whispered a prayer to the god: "Dear God, please don't let my world disappear. Let everything continue as it is, for ever and ever. Amen."

And she stroked her stomach.

On the morning of the day she was to go to Athens, Elena walked among their olive trees. Where the trees ended, marking off a stretch of land sloping down to the sea, stood an old stone wall. The wall was covered—almost held together—by ivy. At its foot, ants were toiling. They had worn a path through the grass and wild thyme. The path negotiated steep bends through the bands of stonework before disappearing. It emerged on the other side of the wall, and made its meandering way inland. Here was a world which continued as it was, she thought, for ever and ever, amen.

Elena had always taken an interest in the ants. Sometimes she dropped crumbs of bread in their path, in order to watch them carry the morsels down into the dark of their nest.

The ants had been there since before Thucydides was born, long before Christ. So she imagined. She was studying Thucydides with the young history master. Thucydides said that events in the past would be repeated in the future. She had felt uneasy about this idea, for which the young history master had no explanation. Now she asked the god inside her if the universe might be recreated as before. Or had it been recreated and destroyed many times? The sleeping god, as usual, gave no reply.

She heard her mother calling from the house. Elizabeth was standing there in her best clothes, looking anxious. And beside her was a smart grey lean impatient man from the TV studios.

If Elena wished only to continue her dreamy private schoolgirl life, there were those in Athens, by contrast, whose profession it was to intrude on other people's lives. This was true from the Prime Minister downward, to the lowest journalist. Many men and women in this category immediately interested themselves in Elena Papoulias and her remarkable good fortune.

The young girl's pregnancy, real or supposed, coupled with her remarkable strokes of fortune in winning treasure both ancient and modern, made a wondrous combination. Elena's adolescent beauty supplemented the attractions of the story.

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"How photogenic you are, dear," exclaimed one photojournalist, adjusting her long dark hair to his own requirements.

"Why, you're so nervous," said a woman interviewer. "You're like a little deer. Remember how Iphigenia was turned into a deer? That's you."

"I don't think Iphigenia was turned into a deer," said Elena. "Someone she was going to sacrifice turned into a deer."

"Oh, I don't set any store by those silly old myths," said the interviewer, with a vexed laugh. "Where did you pick up this classical stuff anyway?"

"I've discussed it with my history teacher," said Elena. And thus sprang up another strand of the news story: the shy pupil in love with her earnest young teacher. A photographer was dispatched immediately to her school.

Like Iphigenia trapped in Tauris, Elena was certainly trapped in Athens, day after day, as a guest of the Prime Minister. She was given a room in a small hotel in the busy part of the city, with her mother for company. Her Aunt Sophia, respectful now, came to visit and brought sweet cakes, and offered advice about how all the money should be invested. As for the Youth Lottery, it was re-named Elena's Lottery and sold twice as many tickets as formerly under its new title.

One reason for Elena's detention in Athens was that her legend spread far and wide. Foreign journalists arrived from abroad, from Italy and Spain and France, while a whole television team arrived from Germany. The Greek tourist board sent an important official to advise Elena on what to say. The board foresaw—correctly—that Elena was a valuable adjunct to the tourist trade.

A day came when Elena had no appointments and she asked Elizabeth if they might return home. Elizabeth said that since she had the day free, she could do whatever she liked. Elena pouted and made no response; there was nothing in Athens she wished to do. She stared out of the window at the busy street, with pedestrians spilling out among the congested traffic. Ants again!

The phone rang. Elizabeth answered. On the line was a man who described himself as a media producer and originator. He wanted to structure a new game show, probably to be called "Golden Fortunes," around Elena. He referred to Elena as a "magic personality." He was calling from Sydney, Australia. He wanted to fly over and discuss the project, in which big money was involved. He assured Mrs. Papoulias that everyone in Australia knew about her daughter, and how everything she touched turned to gold. Ideal for hostessing a game show.

After giving a noncommital answer, Elizabeth put the phone down. She had turned very pale. The producer's words brought her husband vividly to mind. If Costas, on the loose in Australia, heard of his youngest daughter's fortune, doubtless he would come scurrying on the trail of money and they would all be in trouble. Why, he might even kidnap Elena. You heard of such things happening.

"Elena, my dear," Elizabeth said. "I don't think it is wise to go home.

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I think we should stay in Athens. Athens is a big city. We must buy a nice house in the suburbs, perhaps in New Philadelphia, and change our name from Papoulias. Perhaps a house with two stories and a little garden and a swing and—" She paused before offering the final titbit. "A swimming pool. . . ."

To her astonishment, Elena gave a small scream and rushed from the room. As she went, she knocked flying a plate of cakes Aunt Sophia had brought them. Elizabeth jumped up but her daughter had gone, slamming the door behind her. Downstairs she rushed, straight out into the street. A passing motorcyclist knocked her down.

BAD LUCK FOR GOOD FORTUNE ELENA! screamed the newspaper headlines. ATHENIAN WONDER GIRL IN COMA.

In only a few hours—indeed, before night fell in Athens—strange reports were arriving from all quarters. The Moon had disappeared.

The news from various battlefronts around the world, or from famine-struck countries in Africa, even the concern for Elena, was as nothing to this alarming news. The Moon had vanished as if it had never existed.

MOON DOOM. PRESIDENT DENIES U.S. INVOLVEMENT.

There was no accounting for it, although many experts were dragged in to have their say. Earth's beautiful satellite, the subject of poems, dreams, aspirations and other mental states since before history began, was no more. It simply ceased to exist, leaving not a moonbeam behind.

In the long term, the effect its absence would have was incalculable. In the short term, ocean tides would die away. It was useless for astronomers to point out that in fact the sun raised tides too, though with only a third of the Moon's power. The collapse of tidal waters would spell unwonted change. Since the Mediterranean and Aegean were almost tideless, local effects would be slight. So Athenians were assured by their journalists.

News of something much more alarming took longer to seep through. The Greek language had changed. Changed beyond recognition.

No Greeks noticed this freakish phenomenon. It was diplomats, exporters, foreigners, tourists, anyone who had been at pains to learn something of the language, who announced the truth. Their claims were immediately dismissed. But no, the Greeks were talking a different language from formerly, even from the previous day. When anyone checked with yesterday's videos, or with LPs and CDs and cassettes, they found that everyone was speaking or singing in a tongue now completely incomprehensible to them. The new language had a different root structure and was compatible with no other on Earth.

Chaos broke out. Language schools closed, re-opened, closed for good. Men and women in the Greek diplomatic service overseas shot themselves.

Other alarming news was ignored for the time being; that physical constants had changed meant little to the man in the street. As startled physicists were soon able to prove, the energy equation was now

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$E = MC^{1.7713}$

From now on, a great deal more matter would be needed to produce one joule of energy. Nuclear power plants started to go out of business.

While all these arbitrary and inexplicable events were unfolding, Elena Papoulias lay unconscious in a hospital bed. She had a room to herself, into which only medicos, nurses, and her mother were allowed. But it was Elena's superstitious Uncle Constandine who waylaid the doctors.

"I alone know what the problem is," he said. "I have a diagnosis. I can tell you what is wrong."

"Elena is best left quietly in our care, thank you," the hospital doctors said.

So Dr. Houdris went on television.

The essence of Houdris's claim was that there had once been a war in Heaven. As he reminded viewers, both Greek pagan myths and Christian faiths contained references to this war. Many other myths featured variants of the same story; the Norse legend of Ragnarok, for instance, spoke of the battle between good and evil gods. One of the great gods, weary of this endless war, had descended to take refuge inside his niece, Elena Papoulias.

"All the god wants is rest. He sleeps inside Elena. And what is he dreaming?"

Houdris's interviewer said suavely, "Possibly you can tell us what the god is dreaming?"

Houdris smoothed his moustache as if to indicate he had the interviewer trapped and replied, "He is dreaming our entire universe. We are all figments of the god's dream."

The interviewer laughed with only a trace of amusement. "This is getting pretty wild, Dr. Houdris. How do you know all this?"

Houdris's eyes gleamed behind his pink lenses. There was no doubt in his mind, he said. How else could the aberrations in what had been hitherto regarded as fixed laws—constants—be explained except by understanding that all were figments of a cosmic dream? No, he was not being unscientific. He was being scientific by deducing facts from evidence. Elena's accident had caused the god's slumber to be disturbed, its dream to be disrupted—hence the vanished moon and the rest of it. Perhaps it almost woke up from its sleep.

"And if the god did wake up?" inquired the interviewer, now unable to suppress the scorn in his voice.

"Then our universe would burst like a bubble, because it is just a dream. . . ."

"What has the damp sea wind brought to my family?" Elizabeth Papoulias asked herself in the quiet of the hospital room. She sat beside her daughter's bed, trying to shake herself from one of her dark moods. With sorrow she regarded Elena's closed eyes and silent face.

"Stop being miserable, Lizzie," she told herself. The doctors declared

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that Elena would recover. After all, everything was wonderful. Would there be a grander moment in her life than when she and Elena had ridden beside the Prime Minister in his special car, through cheering Athenian crowds? Of course she had been proud. The Prime Minister had made a speech, holding Elena's hand some of the time as he spoke. "Greece," he had boasted, "is now the most famous country in the world."

She had thought at the time how well it had sounded, had repeated the words to Sophia and Constandine. Later, a member of an opposition party had laughed and said, "Greece was always the most famous country in the world. What's the old idiot on about?" Then Elizabeth had been embarrassed, thinking that she had been unable to perceive the foolishness of the P.M.'s speech for herself.

And she was involved with the foolishness. That brought her to the nub of her cogitations. She was just a peasant, a simple country wench at heart. Many of her fellow countrymen went abroad to work, to Australia and America and elsewhere, and returned much improved and richer. She had got no further than Athens, and not on her own merits. She was richer, yes, but she told herself she was unimproved. The elevated mood she had enjoyed at the Temple of Aphaia was forgotten.

Here she was putting on weight, not yet forty and putting on weight, eating sweet cakes every day in smart restaurants. A neighbor was looking after her three older daughters—a disgrace in itself.

To gaze out at the ceaseless traffic rumbling under the window was tiring. She paced about the hospital room. Elena lay silent in the bed, eyes closed—dreaming of who knows what?

Looking down at her daughter, Elizabeth thought to herself, This at least is beautiful and good and innocent. Perhaps that's why she was chosen by the gods. If only we could return to existence as it was long ago in the Golden Age of Greece, when there were only goddesses . . . then we wouldn't have to suffer having our lives messed about by men. . . .

She brightened up. It was nearing five in the afternoon. Almost time to meet her sister and some friends in a neighboring café. They would have a good chat; most of them were country people at heart, however smartly they dressed. And Elizabeth had a new dress to show off. There would be chocolate cake. . . . Elena was safe where she was.

Since the majority of people never know what to think, even at the best of times, they derive their opinions from what others say, and pass them off as their own. Thus, many people all round the world began to nod in agreement when they heard the Houdris Hypothesis, as it was dubbed. They had, they said, always known the whole of existence was a dream and not what politicians and scientists claimed it was.

Some of them began to ask, "Why does everyone hate work so much?" And answered their own question, "Because work has no part in Dreamland."

The Greek government hurriedly assembled a special committee of inquiry to investigate the matter of Elena Papoulias.

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A senior German philosopher was flown in from Munich to address the committee.

"While we have yet to discover why the Moon has disappeared, why energy has taken a turn for the worse, and why your language has changed overnight, solutions to these unexpected problems will be found. Scientific solutions. My colleagues believe that the solar system happens to be passing through an unsuspected cosmic flaw. Once we are through the flaw, everything will revert to normal.

"As for the young Papoulias girl's connection with these events, it is merely coincidental, and an invention of the popular press.

"Let me speak briefly concerning what has been called the Houdris Hypothesis, that existence is a dream from which we shall all wake. It is, of course, complete nonsense, designed to scare old women. Excuse me, old men.

"This absurdly named hypothesis is based merely on deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning from self-evident premises provides us with no sound knowledge of the world. It must be *observation* which supplies the premises on which we base our knowledge, and observation requires modern scientific knowledge, not irrational guesses. We need to know precisely the time when the Moon left its orbit, in which direction it is now heading, at what velocity, etc. We need to know precisely the nature of the language you now speak in Greece, its roots, etc. and when exactly you began to speak it. Possibly you are as a nation—I only say 'possibly'—suffering from a form of mass hallucination. As to the collapse of the mass-energy equation, that may be simply explained as a technical mistake somewhere, though admittedly there does seem to be less sunlight reaching the Earth just now. This could be caused by sunspots, or some other solar phenomenon."

The professor paused impressively.

"What we require a non-scientifically trained populace to understand is that our modern knowledge of the universe is based on both deduction and induction. Deduction alone, which the Houdris idea offers us, is an example of pre-scientific thinking. It will not stand once the scientific data comes in. Our knowledge of the universe is based on true facts and measurements gleaned from many disciplines. How then could the universe be a dream? The notion is preposterous."

He sat down.

A Greek philosopher stood up. He was an old man, who clutched the back of a chair set before him to support himself. His voice was thin, but he spoke clearly enough.

"My friend from Munich is himself falling into unscientific ways by deriding the dream theory without examining it. For countless centuries, humanity has been haunted by the belief that all life is a dream. You will recall the celebrated case of the Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu, who dreamed he was a butterfly and, on waking, could not tell if he was Chuang Tzu who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming it was Chuang Tzu. Does not the science of subatomic physics

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show that all we regard as solid matter is really a cosmic dance of waves and particles incapable of explanation?

"For my own part, I see nothing particularly fantastic in the belief that our whole extraordinary universe is someone or something's dream.

"Let me ask you all this. Rational knowledge—the accumulation of facts—has immensely increased over the ages. Yet why is it that what we may call absolute knowledge hasn't increased one jot since the days of Socrates and the Buddha? As Chuang Tzu, whom I've already mentioned, said, 'If it could be talked about, everyone would have told their brother.' Doesn't that suggest that everything is *arbitrary?*

"My friend's argument places overmuch trust in empirical knowledge. Instead of seeking human understanding, he would rely on scientific instruments. Very well. Telescopes do not lie. But all our knowledge of the outside world—and of the inside world, come to that—rests ultimately on our senses. What are those senses made of? Protoplasm, a kind of jelly. There is no sort of proof which can convince us that our senses, our perceptions, bring us a definitive truth about the world. Indeed, we know that world-pictures change almost from century to century. They are perforce subjective.

"All ultimately is a matter of interpretation according to . . . well, according to what I don't know. Temperament, perhaps? Certainly we all have different outlooks on the world. My brother—dead now, alas—and I could never agree about anything. There are people even today who claim our planet is flat, and can advance so-called proof of it. . . . People seem to live equally happily with or without a belief in God.

"So what do I think in conclusion? That's briefly said, ladies and gentlemen. I believe that the greatest care should be taken of little Elena Papoulias. One more shock like her street accident and we may suddenly find—well, permit me to quote Shakespeare—

> *"The great globe itself,*
> *Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,*
> *And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,*
> *Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff*
> *As dreams are made on. . . ."*

Elena sat up in the hospital bed, struggling with the pillows. She looked about her room. A shaded light burned by her bedside; a blue Athenian night pressed against the window panes. On the couch beside her bed, Elizabeth slept, her face turned from the light. Flowers from well-wishers were ranged all round the room. A buoyant sense of health, more potent than medicine, filled Elena. She smiled and stretched. Her wounds and bandages had disappeared.

"Thank you, dear little god," she whispered, stroking her stomach.

Climbing out of bed, she dressed as quietly as possible so as not to disturb her mother. As she crept from the room, impulse made her seize up a bunch of chrysanthemums from a jam jar. With these she proceeded

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down the corridor. All was quiet. The hospital at this pre-dawn hour echoed with silence.

When she reached the foyer, a night receptionist roused from a doze and stared at her curiously. With her face half-hidden by flowers, Elena said, "These have to be taken immediately to someone ill in the Hilton Hotel. Please let me out."

The receptionist yawned and pressed a button. When one of the side doors unlocked, Elena opened it and walked through into the first suspicions of dawn. Though the street was deserted, it still held the stale tang of car and bus exhausts, but she breathed it with gratitude and set off at a good pace. She dropped the flowers on top of the first plastic garbage bag she came across. Where she was going she hardly knew or cared; all she wanted was to be free.

Light was seeping back into the world when she found herself on Aharnon, strolling north. She realized she was enjoying Athens for the first time, seeing the city wake to a new day. The few people who were about walked slowly, as if convalescing from sleep. Some of them bid her good morning. A bakery was opening, filling the street outside with the smell of fresh bread.

Persephone, Artemis, and Rea would be waking now, preparing for their long daily journey to school. Elena missed their company and the cozy aromas of four girls growing up and sleeping in that little pretty room with the blue wallpaper. From their one window you could see the line of the sea, and occasionally a ferry on it, heading for the islands.

At one point she became aware she was being followed. In the reflection of a shop window she saw him, a chunky adolescent with fair hair, only a few years older than Elena herself, wearing a dirty T-shirt and scruffy trousers. An unwashed sort of fellow, she thought, who had never seen a comb in his life. She quickened her pace. The youth ambled along the other side of the street, keeping her in view.

She was passing a telephone booth standing outside a church when the phone started ringing. On impulse, as if directed, Elena entered the booth and picked up the receiver.

"Elena, is that you? Good. Listen, this is your dad. How are you?"

She was not amazed. "I'm fine. Where are you?" She was not amazed to hear his voice for the first time.

"I'm calling from a one-eyed hole in Australia, outside Adelaide." The voice carried an echo with it; she knew this meant a satellite link-up. It was thin, almost flavorless, squeezed through cable, freeze-dried in the stratosphere.

"Are you going to come back to us, Daddy?" She withheld too much hope from the question.

"Hang on, where's your mother? Give me her number and I'll call her. Listen, I'm going to be back in Greece just as soon as I can make it. I've been down on my luck, Elena. Don't listen to anything your mother tells you. My trouble is, I have a pathological dread of hard work. A doctor told me it was inherited."

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"So when will you be here, Daddy? We'll all be glad to see you."

"I have to be careful, girl. Don't tell anyone I phoned. I'm going to look after you properly. How'd you like to live in with your old dad?"

"And my sisters as well? What about Rea and—"

"Oh, blast it—" said the distant nasal voice on the other end of the phone, and the connection was broken off.

Elena went and sat in a little corner café which was just opening. She ordered a Nescafé as she considered the conversation. She could not conceal from herself that it was not the best of conversations. All the same, it would certainly be good to have her father back. She could not understand his insistence on secrecy.

The woman behind the bar kept staring. Whenever she saw Elena looking at her, she switched on a false smile. A heavy woman, she supported her torso with elbows on the counter. Elena tried to ignore her.

Pale early sunshine slowly filled the opposite side of the street. She saw that the combless youth was still hanging around, pretending nonchalance, lighting a cigarette. At the same moment, she realized that she had no money with which to pay for her coffee, or to hire a taxi back to the safety of the hospital and her mother. She was trapped at her table.

Behind the bar, the woman was looking alternately at Elena and at the screen of a little television set, snuggled by the cash register on her bar. A man came in, carrying crates of mineral water from a van parked outside the café. After conferring with him, the woman made a phone call. Elena became anxious in case this pantomime involved her; she sat paralyzed over her cooling coffee. "Do something, will you?" she whispered to the god within her.

Almost at once, the woman came over from behind the bar, walking clumsily.

"You don't have to pay for that coffee," she said, flicking her automatic smile on and off again. "It's free to you." She gestured toward the cup.

Elena looked at her inquiringly.

The woman said, by way of explaining her generosity, "Well, you're a goddess, aren't you? So you're welcome to the Nescafé. It says on TV the whole city's looking for you at this very moment."

"I'm not a goddess." She pouted, disliking this weighty person. "I'm just an ordinary girl. I go to school, like my sisters."

The woman clutched her apron. Looking around as if for help, she said, "I'm not going to argue with you, miss. I know who you are. You're the one who made the Moon disappear. I don't want this café disappearing or anything nasty like that. Please leave without causing trouble."

"That's plain silly," said Elena, conscious as she spoke that she had never addressed an adult in this manner before.

"Silly, is it? For all I know you're one of the old lot come back—Nemesis or one of the Erinyes, the Furies. All the money I borrowed from the till I shall most certainly pay back, believe me."

"It's got nothing to do with that. I just wanted a coffee."

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"All right, you've had your coffee, miss, now please leave. Take a bun with you, if you like. I'll pay for it. Gladly."

When Elena rose to go, the woman backed nervously away. Elena saw how poor and broken her shoes were.

"Thank you for the coffee. It was very nice."

She was hesitating to leave when a police car came screaming to the door. Two police officers climbed out, surveyed the street, and entered the café. Both addressed Elena politely. They said they would like to escort Elena back to the hospital—if she was willing to accompany them.

As she climbed into the back of their car, the combless youth watched from the other side of the road.

Apartments were being prepared on the roof of the hospital, according to government orders. Painters and decorators had been here earlier, but had broken off from work and not reappeared. Elizabeth walked alone in the empty rooms. Sounds of traffic were muted.

"It is not true that you are merely a peasant woman," said a voice in her head. "Nor is it true that you are old. Nor is it true that you hate your husband."

"It's true I'm getting a bit fat," she said, looking round defensively to see if anyone was there. "Who are you, anyway? What do you mean?" It was impossible to determine whether the voice, so even and clear, was male or female.

The voice said, "I'm telling you things you don't know and you do know at the same time. Eternal truths are not expressible in words. You are growing older; you are also eternally youthful. You are helpless; yet there is infinite power within you. There are no gods; but you are godlike yourself. The universe is no dream; though it has all the qualities of a dream."

Elizabeth backed against a wall. "Am I going crazy? What is all this crap? You're to do with Elena, aren't you? Go and speak to her. She's only downstairs." Her eyes tried to see behind the emptiness of the empty room.

"All humans know such things about themselves. They have the power to make the world begin anew, yet do not use it. Until you grasp that fact, you will continue to be your usual unsatisfactory self, looking uselessly for somewhere to hide."

"Bugger you—excuse my language. I'm happy with myself as I am. How could I get together with Costas again? Come off it!"

And the voice replied, "By making a new start. Because you are not happy with yourself as you are; what about your black moods of depression? Elizabeth Papoulias, I shall speak to you only this once, so heed me. Your youngest daughter, having been chosen, must go elsewhere. She must join us. But you—you must remain *here,* wherever you consider *here* to be. You must realize yourself fully and create a new world, for yourself and others."

She clutched her head. She shook her head. She stamped her foot. She

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clapped her hands together once. "Go away, damn you! We mortals have to settle for the present world as it is, don't we? Don't we? Surely?"

"Then why pray?" With mockery in its laughter, the voice asked, "And if the old world is crumbling. . . ."

Darting about the room, cursing, Elizabeth called, "Are you the forgotten Aphaia to whom I was daft enough to pray on Aegina? Are you god or goddess, or am I going mad?"

No answer came. The unfinished room was suddenly emptier than it had ever been. She stood waiting in the midst of the space. Nothing happened. What was truth, what deception, what a trick of the senses?

Going over to the window, she looked down at the Athenian traffic. Was there a higher reality than that mechanical muddle? In a piercing moment of introspection, she knew that there was, that the traffic had no more duration in time than the gasoline on which its engines depended.

But under her breath she repeated an old saying, "Whom the gods love they first make mad." Was that how it went? She thought so, but being an ignorant peasant woman she was uncertain.

She went downstairs to find her daughter.

Dr. Constandine Houdris was not a bad man. Like the rest of humanity, he had his problems. Ambition was one of the traits which made his life uncomfortable. Appearing on television a few times convinced him that he was someone of importance. He was anxious to maintain this illusion, both in his own mind and in that of the general public. Even if life were a dream, as he had declared, he was determined to make his name in it; he was no philosopher.

Another little problem to vex him was his relationship with his wife. The creamy cakes to which Sophia was addicted had transformed the slender young girl he married into a portly lady who suffered from breathlessness and leg trouble. Houdris was not cross with Sophia on this account; although he could scarcely bear to acknowledge the fact to himself, he realized that creamy cakes were probably Sophia's way of compensating for his waning interest in her. He accepted that the world was as it was: no more perfect than the creatures who inhabited the dream. Changing it was not within the compass of his aspirations.

Houdris had his compensations. Many attractive women visited his surgery with one complaint or another. Often it was necessary for these ladies to remove their clothes in order to be examined. The doctor's little pink lenses were not the only ones turned on this display of nudity; he had rigged up hidden cameras which recorded each examination, so that he could enjoy at leisure the beauty of the female form. Among this collection of photographs were several of his niece, Elena Papoulias, in various positions.

Now that Elena was famous, and more than famous, these pictures had market value: though the doctor put it to himself in another way. *Scientific* value. Decorating his reminiscences—or perhaps a booklet of

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sexual advice to young ladies—these pictures could only increase his fame.

He made a deal with a publisher, who made a deal with a top-circulation glossy magazine, which published six studies of Elena naked. In no time, these pictures of a pretty girl, in the first flush of puberty, traveled across the world, leaping from country to country, bookstall to bookstall, cover to cover.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Elizabeth and Sophia was changing. They had become close, developing a connoisseur's fondness for cream cakes. Sophia no longer patronized; if anything, she fawned. Elizabeth and her daughter were now installed more comfortably in the hospital, for observation and gynecological studies. Every morning, Elizabeth sallied forth with her sister; they went looking for a discreet property for Elizabeth to buy. Since Elizabeth had received a phone call from Costas, she considered it a matter of urgency to find a place in which she could hide from her husband.

Sophia agreed that no voices in the head should distract her from the quest; besides, looking at houses was fun.

The sisters met as usual in Omonia one morning, lingering over a plate of cakes, before catching a taxi to investigate a house for sale in one of the outer suburbs.

"I shall have to have a guard dog," said Elizabeth.

"You can afford two, dear," said Sophia. "Big brutes with bad tempers." She had never liked Costas. But she was downcast this morning, as they rolled across the congested city, and felt forced to reveal to Elizabeth that she had some bad news. So saying, she drew from her bag a folded copy of the Greek edition of *Elle Même*. She unveiled to her sister the nude pictures of Elena, photographed by Constandine.

Elizabeth broke down and wept for the shame of it. "Woe! Woe! What's life worth if relations can do such things to me? It's a disgrace to the family! Such naughty pictures!"

"And Costas may see them," Sophia blubbered. "I'll divorce that wretch Constandine, see if I don't."

The taxi driver looked around to ask what the trouble was. Tears in her eyes, Sophia told him. The driver pulled over to the curb. Infected by Elizabeth's misery, both Sophia and the driver joined in the general weeping. The latter seized *Elle Même* and gazed at the pictures through his tears.

"Lovely," he said, "What pretty tits!," and burst out crying afresh.

When they had all dried their eyes, they proceeded to the smart suburb. The driver stopped at a little kiosk to ask for final directions.

The two women sat in the car. They saw the driver rapt in earnest conversation with the old lady inside the kiosk. Growing impatient, Sophia tapped on the taxi window.

He returned to his car pulling a long face.

"Well then! Where is this street? Didn't the old bitch know?" snapped Sophia. "Ask someone else, can't you?"

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The driver leant in at the window, supporting himself rather in the manner of one who feels he is about to faint.

"I've got two cousins out in Sydney," he said. "The kiosk woman says Australia has disappeared. Just disappeared off the face of the globe. . . ."

Elizabeth screamed. She knew what it meant. Something bad had happened to her youngest daughter.

That morning, Elena had been feeling content. One of their neighbors from the village had brought Yannis over in his cage, and the little bird was singing happily as if glad to be back in Elena's company. There were also affectionate notes from her sisters, with a rude drawing of her history teacher.

Elena and Elizabeth had been moved into a penthouse still smelling slightly of fresh paint, on the top of the hospital building. Neither of them had ever seen such a smart place before. There was even a jacuzzi and a neat little roof garden, while the glass doors of the luxurious lounge looked out over the flat roofs of Athens to the distant Acropolis. The lounge featured a crystal chandelier and a huge TV set with shutters. All this was paid for by the government, who wanted to keep an eye on Elena. She was no longer allowed to go out of the hospital alone.

Her contentment was increased by the news that her sisters were all coming to stay for the Christmas holiday. Certainly there was plenty of room for them—although Elena now had a bedroom of her own.

In order to surprise her sisters, Elena sent out the duty guard to buy an electronic snorting fluffy pig for Persephone, a new electronic sword-and-sorcery game for Artemis, and an electronic clock which spoke the time for Rea. The state would settle the bill.

Despite the lateness of the year, the day was mild. Elena had the patio doors open on to the roof, and was trotting about barefoot on the thick pile carpet. She was singing to Yannis when she turned and found someone entering the doors.

She saw immediately it was the uncombed youth who had been following her for some while.

"Don't be frightened," he said, coming rapidly toward her. "I'm not going to hurt you. Saw the pictures of you!" He gave a nasty laugh.

It was as bad an opening to a conversation as she had ever heard.

She ran for the broom, but he caught her and seized her wrists. Next moment, she found herself on the carpet, and the uncombed one on top of her, breathing his hot breath in her face.

It was not only Australia. Half of New Zealand was gnawed away, together with New Guinea and sundry Pacific islands. The Southern Cross disappeared at the same time. What remained instead was an uncreated space which no one could enter and no instruments detect. Engineers soon discovered that the value of π was looking a little shaky, while various shades of red vanished forever, everywhere; Santa Claus wore grey. Even more disturbing for the general public was the way in

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which two seconds were found to have seeped away from every minute. Many people felt that their lives had been shortened in consequence.

As a result of these disturbances in what had hitherto been regarded as the natural order, chaos overwhelmed civilization. Various wars had to be canceled. No one would fly in case the earth disappeared from below them. Nothing could be manufactured because measurements and timings were vitally distorted. Even transport virtually ground to a halt when red lights disappeared and wheels ceased to be as round as formerly. Not a clock round about the whole globe could be persuaded to tell correct time.

And it was all because a delinquent youth from Crete had tried to rape precious little Elena Papoulias. The Houdris Hypothesis was largely conventional wisdom by now; Elena's sleeping god had almost been wakened by the attempted rape. Rousing, he had lost part of the thread of his dream, causing Australia to etc. etc. . . .

How fortunate it was that the chandelier in Elena's luxurious lounge had fallen from the ceiling when it did, stunning the combless youth, so that he could be arrested before real harm was done. Thus, the universe was saved to continue its precarious existence.

Demands immediately arose from the UN, from NATO, and from the FBI that Elena should be placed under their care and guarded more effectively. The President of Turkey even went so far as to suggest that Elena should be kept perpetually under anesthesia in order to ensure the god's restful sleep. No more of these irresponsible Greek shocks to Elena's system could be permitted.

The Greek government was mortified by all such suggestions. They immediately had a lock put on Elena's patio doors, after some delay.

Fears were expressed that the god might be born on Christmas Day. He would then awaken and that would be the end of everything. However, the hospital gynecologists and other experts brought in from outside denied this would happen. Elena's was definitely no ordinary pregnancy.

Despite these reassurances, by Christmas Eve millions of people all around what remained of the world were decidedly anxious.

"One good thing," said Elizabeth. "If Australia has disappeared, Costas has probably disappeared with it."

She had found a house she liked. She was standing in its bare rooms with her sister Sophia and Constandine (with whom she was still hardly on speaking terms following his sale of the photographs) and Elena and her three other daughters. Everyone was well-wrapped. It was cold, cold for Athens. Four-thirty on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and their platoon of guards had been allowed to nip off to do some shopping.

Persephone, Artemis, and Rea were wearing smart new coats bought by their mother that very morning. They gathered protectively around their youngest sister, shielding her from her wicked uncle. Dr. Houdris wore dark glasses for the occasion, and kept quiet at first.

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Sophia was gushing about the virtues of the house. "So nice and near the shops!" Her husband agreed and tugged his moustache uncomfortably. "Very good taste." The girls were nodding, smiling, agreeing—all except Elena who just stood there in a golden daze, holding her stomach.

Elena exclaimed, in the middle of all the congratulations, "But we can't see the sea from this house."

In Elizabeth's mind, it was as if a dark cloud obscured the sun. She perceived that Sophia and her husband were merely buttering her up, that the girls were miserable and smiling only out of politeness, that Elena felt herself to be in a prison. Immediately, Elizabeth also felt herself imprisoned. One of her old dark moods came upon her. She felt she was worth nothing and could do nothing right.

"The government is paying for everything," she said glumly. "It can't pay for the sea."

"It could pay for a house by the sea," the doctor pointed out. Grinning at Elena, who immediately hid behind her sisters, he added, "If that's what Elena wants, then that's what she should have."

"Oh, life's so difficult!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Why is it so difficult? Why don't you all go away and leave me?"

"Lizzie, dear," said Sophia, taking her arm. "I thought you'd grown out of these fits. We'll leave if you like, but remember that the only important thing is that Elena should be content—for the sake of the whole world."

"The world! What's the world ever cared about me? Why should I care about it? Look how fat I've got. . . ."

"You are a bit fat, Mommy dear," agreed Persephone.

"Perhaps you're pregnant again, Mommy dear," suggested Artemis.

"At least you're not as fat as Auntie, Mommy dear," Rea told her.

They all began to shuffle uncertainly toward the door, leaving Elizabeth standing, a pillar of gloom, in the middle of the empty space. Houdris decided to give his sister-in-law a short lecture, if only to restore his own standing in his wife's eyes.

"You must raise your sights a bit, Lizzie. Think of your position. You have power and influence now and should use them."

"So Aphaia told me," Elizabeth muttered to herself.

"Well then, take my advice, don't buy this hen-coop. Buy yourself a palace. Soak the government, the way it always soaked us. Order a yacht. Live decently while you've got the chance." He knew Elizabeth would understand the real meaning of what he said: Stop being such a peasant.

She flew into a rage and drove them all out of the house, calling Elena back only at the last moment.

"A fine way to behave to her nearest and dearest," exclaimed Sophia as she shuffled down the garden path, nose in air. "Particularly at Christmas. Her and her rude daughters!"

Mother and daughter stood confronting each other with only the faded wallpaper of the unsold room for company. Elena dropped her gaze, remorseful that she had upset her mother. She held her stomach protectively.

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"I'm stuck with you, Elena, aren't I? And you're stuck with me. I suppose that the god is going to be sleeping inside you all your life, long after I'm dead. Why do the gods trespass in our affairs, damn them?"

"They started up the world, after all, Mom. Just imagine a world started up by *humans!* That would be in an even worse pickle, I'm sure."

Elizabeth felt in her shoulder bag and brought out a sharp kitchen knife. "I've carried this about with me for some days," she said. "It's for a certain purpose." The smile she gave was not a real smile. She told Elena for the first time that her father was a criminal, insisting on what a wicked man he was. She knew Costas had escaped from prison; Father Nikolaos had told her so, and Costas had confirmed it over the phone. When she heard that Australia was destroyed, she rejoiced—rejoiced!—because she hoped he had also been destroyed.

"Oh, no, Mother. Daddy had already left Australia. He's in Athens. I saw him once, I'm sure of it. He's following us around. He wants to join us for Christmas. I want him to join us for Christmas."

"Never! I'll kill him if I set eyes on him again. He's only after you for the money." She brandished the knife.

Elena shook a finger at her mother. "You must do what I say, mustn't you? I need my father, whatever he's done wrong. You and he will have to get together again. If you upset me, the universe will end. Don't forget that."

"Let it end! Let it! I need a change!" She remembered that the ghost of Aphaia had claimed that she could create a new world if she tried. The thought entered Elizabeth's mind that it would be an advantage if the universe did end. She saw it as full of her misery, packed with everyday difficulties. She could get her own back on Sophia, on Constandine, on her husband, and most of all on Elena, whose fault it was that their old peaceful life had been stolen away. Everyone else might be keen for the universe to continue, from the professors and the P.M. to the taxi driver; she wished it to stop. All she had to do was plunge the knife into Elena's belly. Then the whole human drama would be over.

She remained stock still, wild-eyed, knife in hand. Terrified, Elena felt something move within her. The universe started its contractions.

When Sophia marched out of the house, she had left the front door open. Without listening, Elizabeth had heard the car drive away.

Now there was a new figure at the door. Elizabeth did not immediately recognize him. He was tanned, and had grown a beard, grizzled with thick strands of white among the black. He looked bigger and sturdier than she remembered. He was smiling in an amiable, rather puzzled way, as he hesitated on the threshold, removing what she knew to be an Australian bush hat.

"What are you doing here exactly, Lizzie?" he asked.

She remembered the voice, still slightly teasing as of old. Dropping her knife, she went across the floor to him. To her astonishment, she found she was overjoyed to be enfolded in his arms.

It was just then that Elena went into labor.

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A flash of gold, and a terrible golden darkness. . . . All that remained was the embracing pair, standing on a bare floor, bathed in eternal sunlight.

The couple were starting everything anew. Obscurity hedged in their little realm of light. But so it had always been. ●

ENDLESSNESS

by Tom Disch

Never stops.
Goes on and on.
Continues
to the end of time
and then beyond.
Has neither
dusk nor dawn.
Goes on and on.
Never stops.
Continues
amazing us
by its extent.
Has neither
start nor stop.
Goes on and on.
Continues
beyond the world's
last yawn.

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Never stops.
Is neither
here nor there.
Goes everywhere
and continues
past the last
exit and on.
Never stops.
Continues
unremittingly
adding one to
another and
then one more,
then another,
like a mother
who has a baby
and the baby
has a baby
and so on and so
on continuously
to the end of time
and then beyond.
Never stopping.
Continues
without a pause
for breath or death,
or, even if pausing,
resuming after
a suitable interval,
chattering away
night and day.
Never stops.
Goes on and on
even after we've
wound down
or gone away.
Continues.
Never stops.

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ON BOOKS by Sheila Williams

MAKING INTRODUCTIONS

It is a pleasure to introduce our trio of new book reviewers—Moshe Feder, Peter Heck, and Paul Di Filippo—to the readers of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. These three authors were chosen after an extensive search through the resumes and critical work of dozens of SF reviewers. Our new critics will share the "On Books" slot with our regular essayist, Norman Spinrad.

Each reviewer will bring his own personal style and tastes to *Asimov's*. We expect to find that the column will be filled with a lively and diverse range of opinions, books, and ideas. Each of these authors is a seasoned critic, and they all share a life-long love of science fiction. We look forward to the contribution they will make to the magazine.

Our May issue features a review column by Moshe Feder. Moshe began to read science fiction at age eight, and he has been enjoying and criticizing it for over a third of a century. While in college, he worked as an assistant editor at *Amazing* and *Fantastic* magazines. After graduation, he became *Publishers Weekly*'s main SF and fantasy reviewer for almost six years.

He left his position at *Publishers Weekly* to join the Science Fiction Book Club, where he became assistant editor. A few years later he demonstrated his versatility by accepting a promotion to editor of the Military Book Club. (To avoid the appearance of conflicting interests, Moshe has agreed to refrain from reviewing military SF.)

Moshe regularly frequents science fiction conventions. He once chaired a small convention, and he was fan guest of honor at an even smaller one. His current claim to fannish fame is the party he hosts with his girlfriend, Lise Eisenberg, on the Friday night of every convention they attend.

Science fiction has given him the chance to shake hands with such childhood idols as Campbell, Heinlein, Bradbury, and Clarke, and later idols like Le Guin, Delany, Silverberg, Wolfe, Disch, and Ellison. He tells us, "It's great to be appearing in the magazine named for Isaac."

Moshe's piece will be followed by Peter Heck's column in our June issue. A voracious reader all his life, Peter's early favorites were

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Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Carl Barks's "Uncle $crooge" comics. His first appearance in print was a fan letter to *Mad* magazine.

Peter has been a freelance writer for most of the past decade. For over twelve years he was the science fiction reviewer at both Long Island and New York *Newsdays*, and he has also published reviews in the Washington *Post*, *Kirkus*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and *Sci-Fi Channel Magazine*. Last year he sold three mystery novels about "Mark Twain, Detective" to Berkley. The first book in the series, *Death on the Mississippi*, will be out in the fall.

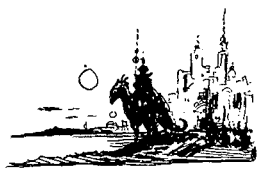
A former science fiction and fantasy editor at Ace Books, Peter may be best known to SF readers as the editor of *Xignals* and *Hailing Frequencies*—Waldenbooks' newsletters for science fiction readers. Mr. Heck lives in Brooklyn with his wife Jane Jewell, two cats, several musical instruments, and a large collection of books.

Science fiction author Paul Di Filippo's first review column will be featured in our July issue. Paul discovered SF at ten, and by age seventeen he was determined to become a writer. Although he sold some nonfiction early on (including an op-ed piece to the New York *Times*) Paul produced over 500,000 words of fiction before he made his first short story sale, "Rescuing Andy," to *Twilight Zone* in 1985.

While those first attempts still take up storage space in his basement, he has since sold over forty short stories. His fiction has appeared in *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *Night Cry*, *Interzone*, *New Worlds*, *Journal Wired*, and other magazines and anthologies. His nonfiction publications include regular pieces in *Science Fiction Eye*, *Thrust/Quantum*, *New Pathways*, the Washington *Post*, *SF Age*, and the *SFWA Bulletin*. His stories "Kid Charlemagne" and "Lennon Spex" were both Nebula-award finalists.

Paul has two books, *The Steampunk Trilogy* and *Fractal Paisleys*, forthcoming from Four Walls Eight Windows. He lives in Providence, RI, with his life's mate Deborah Newton.

With their varied backgrounds and interests, our new columnists will undoubtedly review an eclectic mix of novels, anthologies, and collections. Their individual efforts should add up to an entertaining and comprehensive column that will never be entirely predictable. Please join with us in extending a warm welcome to Peter, Paul, and Moshe—*Asimov's* new family members. ●



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ON BOOKS

by Moshe Feder

Small Gods: A Discworld Novel
By Terry Pratchett
HarperCollins, $20.00 (hardcover)

More than most literary qualities, humor is a matter of taste. To my taste, Terry Pratchett is the funniest fantasy writer we have at the moment. No one else comes close to making me laugh out loud as often as he does.

He does it to me again in his latest return to the Discworld. This time, an examination of the lives and deaths of gods, of truth versus orthodoxy, of faith and absurdity, is the occasion for a rollicking satire of organized religion that may be the best of its kind since Heinlein. He picks some easy targets, perhaps, but who cares when the rotten tomatoes he pitches at them splat so satisfyingly as they hit dead center!

Pratchett's basic technique here is simple reversal; he turns things on their heads to help us see them afresh. The dominant religion in the country of Omnia is the Church of the Great God Om. In its temples, Om is pictured as a rampaging bull, crushing enemies of the faith beneath his hooves. Church doctrine states that the world is a sphere, floating in space. It is now threatened by a heresy of foreign origin holding that the world is a disc supported on the backs of four huge elephants which ride in turn on the back of a giant turtle swimming through space. (Readers of previous Discworld books know that this is in fact the case.) The heretics' motto: "The Turtle Moves!"

The Great God Om hasn't noticed this threat to his Church; he has a more serious problem. As the Church has grown in power, his own power has declined, since it depends on the true belief of his worshippers, most of whom are having trouble seeing past the Church to their god. As a result, he finds himself trapped in the form of a humble tortoise. In fact, when he drops in on the Church's H.Q.—thanks to an eagle who'd hoped to crack him open for dinner—he finds only one soul whose faith is pure enough for him to hear Om's call. Unfortunately, it is the lowest of the low at the Citadel, a mere novice named Brutha, our hero.

Brutha is an innocent whose life is about to get a lot more complicated, for not only has he been called to the aid of his god, he's been noticed by Vorbis, fearsome head of the Quisition, who feels he has uses for an implicitly loyal, illiterate young man who has an eidetic memory. Vorbis brings Brutha along on an expedition to

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Omnia's next target for conquest, Ephebe, a country of philosophers with much the same resemblance to classical Greece as the setting of *The Boys from Syracuse*. The result is a clash of cultures and a change of Omnia's fortunes that brings both Vorbis and Brutha to fates they could never have imagined. Oh yes, the Great God Om has a change of luck too.

Think of this as a novel for fantasy fans who really liked *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. If you're one of us, you'll have a good time.

Impossible Things
By Connie Willis
Bantam Spectra, $5.99 (paper)

It's important to avoid the appearance (or actuality!) of a conflict of interest, but Connie Willis is too important a writer for me to ignore her second collection of short stories just because Gardner Dozois has provided its introduction and nine of the eleven stories in it first appeared in the pages of this magazine. I assure you, those facts don't automatically predispose me toward it.

In fact, all too often I find myself admiring Willis's writing rather than liking it. She's a fine writer who can hold her own in any literary company, but sometimes she seems uncertain that she's a science fiction writer. At least, so I infer from some of her stories. That's a shame, since I'd really like to be able to point to her as an exemplar of the field's best. I know I'm in the minority with this perception—just look at all the SF awards she's won—but it's consistently the way I've reacted to her work for some time.

Rereading the stories for this review, I had to revise some of my opinions, if not my level of enjoyment. Some of the stories I'd previously branded as mainstream stories in SF greasepaint do just squeak by as highly refined examples of the subgenre known as "sociological SF." In their rigor and characterizational solidity, or their precisely structured satire, they put to shame the '50s stories for which the sociological label was coined. Yet like bleached white flour, they are somehow *so* refined, they've lost something essential; perhaps whatever literary pheromones would make them smell more like SF to me.

I may admire a story like "Ado" (about the threat of political correctness, even to the Bard), or "Even the Queen" (on the liberation of women from the menstrual cycle), the latter a recent award winner. As SF, however, the visceral reaction they evoke from me approximates a shrug. In many of her stories, not just these two, it has something to with the internal balance between the effort expended on the SF premise and that devoted to the characters' reaction to it. Willis is so good at characterization that the mild SF elements seem like no more than an excuse for it, and so the stories feel more like mainstream than SF.

"The Last of the Winnebagos" is an exception in this class of Willis's work. Originally I considered it too sentimental, but it more than holds up on rereading, both as a powerful story and as SF. If you're going to write real sociological SF, it's got to be this strong to work.

There are five stories here with

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some claim on non-sociological genre identity. In approximate order of quality: "Jack" adds a touch of the supernatural to an account of life during the Blitz in London. The recreation of the Blitz is much more impressive than the use of the single fantastic element Jack supplies. "Spice Pogrom," undeniably SF, is a charming and precise homage to Hollywood screwball comedy (especially *The More the Merrier*). I only wish it were as funny as its models. Maybe it would be, as a movie. "Time Out" has some of the same screwball flavor, but with an original plot about time manipulation via people manipulation, and is funnier for its freshness. "Chance," one of the best here, is a deliberately grey and dismal inquiry into the power of small decisions to ramify through our lives. Its variation on the traditional SF theme of alternate time tracks makes the most of Willis's strengths. "Winter's Tale" may be my favorite story in the book. It's a perfectly executed alternate history about Shakespeare's identity. Willis should try more like it—she has a knack for historical re-creation, as we've seen in her novels.

Finally, there are the three stories that irritate me most because they aren't science fiction or fantasy, but they've each been nominated for, or won, genre awards. "Schwarzschild Radius," a Nebula nominee, "In the Late Cretaceous," a Hugo nominee, and "At the Rialto," a Hugo nominee and Nebula winner, are all based on the idea of using science as a metaphor. The first, an impressively imagined look into the trenches of WWI, uses the physics of black holes. The second, a slight satire of academic life and educational reform, uses paleontology and evolution. The third, which mocks scientific conferences and Hollywood, uses quantum theory. The first is affecting, the second falls totally flat, the third raises a small smile. As nicely structured as the metaphors are, not one of these stories is SF—though SF markets may be the only ones that would consider them—and it's beyond me why knowledgeable fans and writers would nominate them for SF awards. (Of course, you can't blame Willis for that.) Yet I feel like a voice crying in the wilderness.

If you're a reader of this magazine, you're probably a Connie Willis fan. If so, buy this book; no Connie Willis fan should be without it. Read it, and we might agree that she's a great writer, but not, for my part, a great *SF* writer.

The Innkeeper's Song
By Peter S. Beagle
Roc, $20.00 (hardcover)

Peter Beagle is one of the best and least prolific serious fantasy writers. If, like me, you were a bit let down by his last book (*Folk of the Air,* 1987), Beagle is about to make it up to you. It may take a while to fall under the spell of *The Innkeeper's Song,* because Beagle has opted to tell it from multiple viewpoints, but stick with it until you get your bearings and you'll stay for the duration. This isn't one of those grand-scaled fantasies with a cast of thousands, and the closest things to a quest or epic journey are mercifully short. The

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focus instead is on characters—those points of view I mentioned—and while the stage never gets too crowded, there are a number of them.

Lal is a legendary warrior and sailor, a striking black woman with lots of experience. Nyateneri, her companion, has formidable martial arts skills of her own. An escapee from a secret order, she's being hunted by its implacable assassins. (Impressive as she seems, there is even more to her than meets the eye.) Lukassa, a pretty girl from an insignificant village, was dead—drowned—until Lal came along and magically resurrected her with a spell learned from the wizard who changed the course of her own life. Lukassa joins Lal and Nyateneri on their journey, only to be heroically, seemingly hopelessly, pursued by Tikat, her betrothed, who is not about to give up the love of his life. Along the way, Tikat meets another friend of Nyateneri's, a werefox.

They will all come together at the inn alluded to in the title, where the innkeeper, Karsh, is tough and canny and reluctantly resigned to the visitors' disruption of his business, and where his stableboy, Rosseth, is more than ready for the excitement the visitors bring with them.

What draws them together is the plight of the very wizard from whom Lal learned that spell. Nyateneri reveals that he was just as important to her. Unfortunately, a more recent student, Arshadin, has a less cordial relationship with him—wants to kill him, in fact, in order to augment his own power. The old man needs help; his powers have waned. Lal and Nyateneri want badly to provide some help, but they have little idea of how, and no idea of how to find him. They will get assistance from unexpected sources.

Although Beagle uses some familiar elements—the inn, the wizard, the woman warrior and so on—he gives them his own spin, so that unlike so much of the fantasy being published, the result does not feel derivative of a thousand other books. The only criticism I have is that I wanted to know the characters better. But with a well-paced plot, a few surprises, and perhaps the best sex scene I've ever read in a fantasy novel, this is a book that will please Peter Beagle's existing audience and add to it.

Moving Mars
By Greg Bear
Tor, $23.95 (hardcover)

Greg Bear goes from strength to strength. This new addition to his distinguished body of work is sure to be considered one of the major SF novels of 1993 and a sure award nominee. The very model of a modern major SF novel, it excels in a number of dimensions.

First, it gives us a convincing picture of life on a colonized Mars two centuries from now. (That's a popular setting these days, for some reason. I wonder what the Martian colonists of the future, troubled by their relationship with Earth, will make of all the twentieth century novels that anticipated their plight.) The system he describes of family syndicates, called Binding Multiples (BMs), makes a

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lot of sense for a high-tech pioneer society with no single cultural origin.

Second, it gives us a fully-realized protagonist, Casseia Majumdar. We watch her grow from a callow college student to a mature and powerful woman. The book is aptly dedicated to Ray Bradbury, but having met Casseia, I couldn't help thinking of Heinlein's Mars, and wondering what the range from Podkayne to Casseia says about SF's progress.

Third, it gives us that without which no Greg Bear novel would be complete, a really Big IDEA. The title hints at its nature, but there's a lot more to it that I won't give away here. Except to suggest that those of you who like cutting edge physics will not be disappointed.

The story spans thirteen years in which Earth attempts to encourage Mars to replace its casually evolved system of government while discouraging it from developing too strong a taste for independence. Ironically, from the SF reader's viewpoint, the ostensible motive for this is the need for all humanity to be united behind the imminent "Big Push," the move into interstellar space. The Martians agree that that's a good idea, but they also know they have a world to build right where they are.

Casseia's first political activity is in a student protest, prompted by university actions that ultimately derive from Earth policy. It's in the course of this civil disobedience that she meets Charles Franklin and begins a friendship that grows into her first serious love affair. Charles, we note, is a physics student with big ideas.

Later Casseia returns to school and, ignoring her BM's banking tradition, majors in government. This later enables her to qualify as assistant to a Martian ambassador on a mission to Earth. The motherworld makes a deep impression on her, but doesn't change her allegiance. She marries an archeologist (yes, this Mars has fossils), transfers to his BM and gets involved in politics. It isn't long before she's helping to draft the first Martian constitution and, later, running for high office in the new government. Of course, there are dissident BMs and even whole districts who abstain from the new arrangements and may cause trouble. More ominously, the work that Charles Franklin and friends, calling themselves the Olympians, have been developing all this time is coming to fruition, and giving Earth a whole new reason to want to control what happens on Mars.

I for one am glad that *Greg Bear* controls what happens on Mars! I can't wait to see where he takes us next.

Worldwar: In the Balance
By Harry Turtledove
Del Rey, $21.00 (hardcover)

There are a number of classic ideas in the alternate history subgenre which have been explored several times. Napoleon and the Civil War have generated many such works, as has WWII, which inspired my favorite, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. Now Turtledove, whose backlist shows he loves the form, contributes a fresh one, with lots of juicy

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possibilities: what if an alien invasion had interrupted World War Two?

Casting his narrative net as widely as the lizardoid aliens (who call themselves the Race) have scattered their ships, he shows us the invasion and the struggle that ensues through the eyes of a disparate group of people, including: an American scientist; two minor league baseball players and their manager; a Chinese peasant woman; a German panzer officer; a Russian woman pilot; and, a Jewish leader in the Warsaw ghetto and his cousin, a radarman in England. Turtledove gives the alien viewpoint, too, and also mixes real historical figures with the fictional characters, which just adds to the fun.

The Race are a conservative species with a very stable society, founded on emperor worship, that has lasted many thousands of years. They have progressed slowly to the point where they can travel between systems, and they have previously conquered two, one twenty-eight thousand, the other ten thousand years ago. Now they are ready for a new conquest, and they are so confident of a walkover that their colony ships are already on the way. Too bad for the lizards that their scout probes misled them with images of a preindustrial world. They'd never imagined that the Big Uglies, as they call us, could have advanced so quickly. This failure of imagination could well prove to be their downfall. (Or their downfall may be their new addiction to a substance found in many human kitchens!) Their technology may be superior (not far different from what we have now), but they don't have humanity's experience with warfare and our ability to adapt relatively quickly to change. They also soon find that the combatants in the preexisting human war will put aside their differences to fight alien invaders. Turtledove makes good use of the awkward partnerships that result.

The aliens are another element he obviously enjoyed working with. The effect on them of their exposure to humans is pleasantly reminiscent of certain stories by Eric Frank Russell and Christopher Anvil. It's good to be reminded that our species just might have a few useful qualities.

This is a less rigorous kind of alternate history than Turtledove's excellent *Guns of the South* (1992). There, he chose to introduce a single, focused change and have all the other changes flow out of it. He could concentrate on detailed extrapolation both of events and in the behavior of historical characters. Here, while those elements remain quite plausible, he's chosen a broad change with so many and such powerful worldwide consequences that the evolution of the new history can't possibly be as exacting. That doesn't prevent it from being a very enjoyable read.

If either alien invasions or alternate history are your cup of tea, don't miss this one. One warning, however. The ending, while not a cliffhanger, is certainly unresolved. The material I was sent gives no hint of when, or if, a follow-up may appear. So hold off if you can't stand being tantalized. The rest of you, go ahead; I have

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been told unofficially that he is working on a sequel. Let's hope so, for clearly Turtledove must be acknowledged today's master of alternate history.

Mefisto In Onyx
By Harlan Ellison
Mark V. Ziesing Books, $16.95 (hardcover)

This slim volume with its unusual 6" × 7¾" horizontal format contains Ellison's longest work of fiction in thirteen years. If history is any guide, it could very well garner that soon-to-be-sixty-year-old *enfant terrible* another set of awards. At 20,700 words the book's power is, of necessity, quite compressed, and too much description would puncture its hard thin shell and drop the pressure considerably. So let me try to give it to you Hollywood style, distilled to high concept.

Rudy Pairis, an African-American Rhodes scholar, has never made much of his life; primarily because he can read minds. Let's say it's something of a distraction. His good friend, a white woman named Allison Roche, has asked to see him. She's an Alabama D.A. who has just had the triumph of her career by convicting serial killer Henry Lake Spanning. He's scheduled to die in the electric chair in just three days and she wants Rudy to visit him. For despite the fact that Spanning's alleged m.o. was particularly vicious and disgusting, Allison has fallen in love with him and believes him to be innocent. She wants Rudy to read Spanning's mind and confirm that belief.

You can probably imagine Rudy's response, as an African-American, to the idea of visiting a penitentiary in Alabama for any purpose. You can sympathize with the mixed emotions caused by his own suppressed feelings for Allison. You'll be interested to learn that even visiting a normal mind can leave him feeling ill, so that the inner landscape of a probable psychopath holds little tourist appeal. You are unlikely to guess where Ellison takes the story next. So that is all I'm going to say about it.

As a shopper's advisory, I should point out that this story first appeared in substantially the same form in the October 1993 *Omni*. (It was about five-hundred words shorter there). If you can find a copy of the magazine, that would be a bargain. $16.95 will strike some people as a lot of money for such a slim book (112 loosely set pages), even with a jacket and introduction by Frank Miller. However, it's not out of line with the price of other small press products. (In fact a thousand people paid sixty-five dollars and bought out every copy of the signed limited edition.) That's a judgment you must make for yourself as a comsumer. All I can tell you is that Ellison does deliver. Oh, there is what appears to be some wheel-spinning shaggy-doggism here and there, but I suspect even that is by design and intended to contribute to the final effect. Something like a rabbit punch to the solar plexus.

Harlan, it's been too long since the last novel. ●

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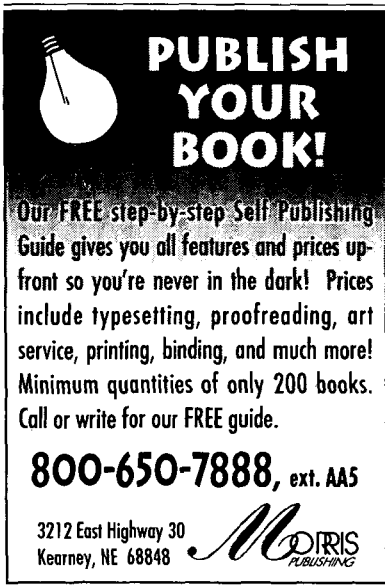
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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Easter is early this year, one of the biggest con(vention) weekends of the year worldwide. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

APRIL 1994

1-3—**BaltiCon.** For info, write: **Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** Or phone: **(410) 563-2737** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Baltimore MD (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Inner Harbor Hyatt. Guests will include: Mercedes Lackey, Larry Dixon, Frederik Pohl, Duane Elms.

1-3—**MiniCon. (612) 338-4728 or 824-5559.** Radisson, Bloomington MN. Williamson, Doherty, Hevelin.

1-3—**CowboyCon. (405) 372-2508.** Stillwater OK. A gaming meet with an SF/fantasy slant & art show.

1-4—**UK National Con. (0272) 737-418.** Britannia Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. Gaiman, Hambly, Duane.

1-4—**UK Nat'l. Media Con. Guernsey, Channel Is.** No phone or hotel known; try con above's number.

1-4—**Australian Nat'l. Con. (03) 305-2590 or 859-3110.** Southern Cross Hotel, Melbourne. Gibson.

1-4—**CampCon, % Felicity Scoones, Box 26-311, Epsom, Auckland NZ.** Workshop-based con.

8-10—**MisCon. (406) 728-9423 or 721-2455.** Red Lion Hotel. Missoula, MT. Zelazny, Freas, Emerson.

8-10—**Winds of War. (919) 966-5677.** Wargaming meet, using Avalon-Hill's Advanced Squad Leader.

15-17—**EatonCon, % Slusser, Box 5000, UCR, Riverside CA 92517. (909) 787-3233.** Academic con.

15-17—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. (703) 951-3282.** Gaming with an SF/fantasy slant.

15-17—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-0645.** At SUNY. 5500 there. Harlan Ellison.

15-17—**Nebula Awards Weekend. C. von Rospach, (510) 948-5456. Fax: (510) 948-5394.** Eugene OR.

15-17—**ConTroll, Box 740969-1025, Houston TX 77274. (713) 895-9202.** M. Weis, Jittlov, Gutierrez.

15-17—**FILKONtario, 302 College Av. W. #20, Guelph ON N1G 4T6.** Regal, Etobicoke ON. SF folksing.

22-24—**Andromeda, 4410 S. 45th St., Lincoln NE 68516.** Downtown Ramada, 9th St. Katherine Kurtz.

22-24—**CasinoCon, Box 575, St. Charles MO 63302. (314) 256-8364.** A. Steele, Tucker, M. Reichert.

22-24—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 224-7654.** G. Cook, D. L. Anderson, Hevelin.

22-24—**Fantasy Worlds Festival, Box 72, Berkeley CA 94704.** Marriott. M. Z. Bradley's own con.

22-24—**AmigoCon, Box 3177, El Paso TX 79923. (915) 542-0443.** Airport Quality Inn. Roger Zelazny.

23-25—**Interact, Box 2080, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia.** Nat'l. Conv. Centre. Media SF/fantasy.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494.** WorldCon. $95/C$125 in 1993.

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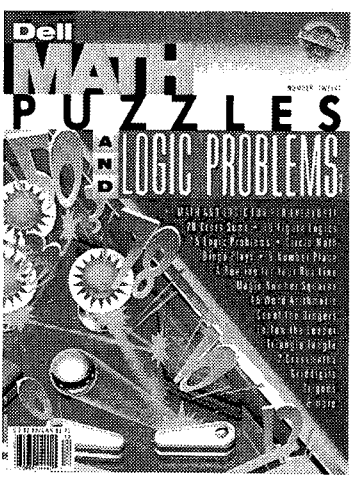

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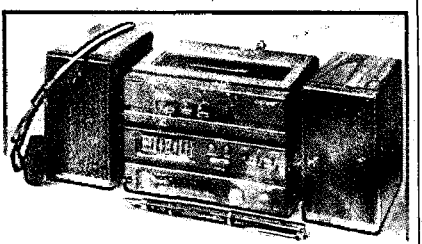

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